

EARLE F. ZEIGLER LECTURE

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From the Locker Room to the Board Room: Changing the Domain of Sport Management

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The North American Society for Sport Management is 10 years old. The actual field of sport management as we understand it today is at least 35 years older. Zeigler (1987) even goes as far as to suggest that there have been courses on the organization and administration of physical education and athletics in our colleges and universities since 1890. The first textbooks in sport management had titles such as *The Organization and Administration of Intramural Sports* (Means, 1949), *The Administration of Physical Education: For Schools and Colleges* (Hughes & French, 1954), and *Administration of Physical Education and Athletics: The Case Method Approach* (Zeigler, 1959). As their titles suggest, the focus of these texts was on the management of physical education and athletic programs. Quite rightly they contained chapters on such issues as how to organize athletic contests, how to manage intramural programs, and how to maintain inventories of athletic equipment. These topics reflect the domain of sport management as it was in the field's formative years. Nike and ESPN were not yet created, the NHL only had six teams, merchandising and licensing agreements were virtually unheard of, and the only connection between McDonalds and the Olympics was if you stopped for a hamburger on the way to or from one of the events. Today things are different. Sport, as many commentators have noted, is big business (cf. Aris, 1990; Wilson, 1988) and big business is heavily involved in sport.

What I want to argue is that sport management has not kept pace with the type of changes that have occurred in the world of sport. I will try to provide evidence to show that our research is still very much dominated by studies of physical education and athletic programs. I will also suggest that we need to expand the domain and nature of our inquiries to include the vast range of organizations that constitute, what has been termed, the sport industry. We need, as my title implies, to move the focus of our research from the locker room to the board room.

Where to begin! As I just noted, the focus of much of the early research in our field was on the management of physical education and athletic programs.

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I also suggested that I felt that this had not changed a lot over the past 20 or more years. On what basis you may ask do I make this claim. Well, in preparing this article I went through all of the published copies of the *Journal of Sport Management* (20 issues in total). Of the articles published in these issues with an identifiable empirical focus, 65% have dealt with organizations involved in the delivery of physical education or athletic programs. This, I would suggest, is a somewhat disproportionate overrepresentation given the relative position of these type of organizations within the broader spectrum of the sport industry. The only other type of organizations that show evidence of being subject to any sustained empirical investigation were professional sport franchises (7.5%), national-level sport organizations (12.5%), and fitness clubs (10%).

However, while the fact that 65% of published studies have focused on physical education and intercollegiate athletic organizations is striking, equally as striking, and in many ways maybe more of a cause for concern, are the type of organizations we have failed to include in our research. There are, for example, no studies of athletic footwear companies, a multibillion dollar business in North America, no studies of companies involved in the manufacture of any other type of sports equipment, no studies of the small entrepreneurial organizations that sell products such as sports equipment or trading cards, no studies of service providers such as ski hill operators or sport marketing companies, and no studies of the merchandising and licensing companies that market sport products. These, I would hasten to point out, are just examples. This list is by no means exhaustive. Suffice it to say that in terms of the type of organizations that sport management scholars have studied, our conception of the industry is a very narrow one. It is my contention that if our field is to grow and flourish and truly live up to the title "*Sport Management*," we need to establish ourselves as the leading experts on the management of the vast array of organizations that constitute this industry. That is to say, we need to broaden our domain of operation.

This will require us to move away somewhat from our emphasis on studies that look at physical education and athletic programs. We may wish to extend the work we have done on professional sport bodies, national sport organizations, and fitness clubs. But more importantly, we will need to develop a body of knowledge on the structure and operations of the many and various organizations that constitute the sport industry. Within this category I would include not only those type of organizations I just mentioned but also local sport clubs and leagues, private sport clubs, government agencies responsible for sport, multisport organizations such as the United States Olympic Committee and the Canadian Olympic Association, and Olympic Games organizing committees such as those operating in Atlanta, to name but a few. We must also, I believe, be prepared to look at companies that, while they may not have sport as their central focus, use sport for purposes such as promoting their product or as a vehicle to penetrate new markets. Coca Cola's sponsorship of the Olympics and the link between media mogul Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation and the World League of America Football are examples of this type of situation. These organizations, I would suggest, are integral components of the sport industry, and as such, we need to understand the way sport influences and is influenced by their operations.

However, establishing ourselves as the experts in the management of sport will not only require us to broaden the range of organizations that we study, it will also necessitate a considerable change in the theoretical bases of our work,

a broadening of the places we publish and present our research, a re-examination of the topics we study and the adoption of new approaches to doing research. It is these issues I would like to explore in the rest of this article.

As far back as 1967, Spaeth noted that it seemed that many in our field appeared virtually unaware of developments in management theory. Twenty years later in 1987, Zeigler (p. 10) pointed out that despite positive efforts by a few scholars, awareness of the theoretical literature on management “had increased only marginally.” I would suggest that today, almost ten years further on, the situation is not that different. Any analysis of the literature in our field would, I believe, reveal that much of our research has failed to take into account current concepts and theories from the broader field of management. This situation is, in my opinion, highly problematic. Studies that are not based on sound and current theories are limited in their relevance and generalizability. As such, they gain us little credibility with practicing sport managers or with scholars in the broader academic community. They also do little to move our field forward or to establish us as the leading experts in our chosen area.

How, then, can we position ourselves to fulfill the promise and potential that our field offers to us? The first and most obvious step is to ensure that we are familiar with current concepts and theories from the area of management and that we use these ideas to underpin our work. This is important because, while some of us may not like to hear it, this is where the leading developments in such areas as strategy, effectiveness, decision making, technological innovation, and change are occurring. It is important to note, however, that a familiarity with current developments in management theory cannot be achieved by a cursory read of a textbook that overviews organization culture, marketing strategy, or some other subdisciplinary area. Rather, it requires an ongoing engagement with the topics and debates that are found in the leading academic journals in this field. These include, but are no means limited to, such publications as *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *Organization Studies*, *Journal of Management Studies*, *Accounting Organizations and Society*, *Human Systems Management*, *Journal of Marketing*, and so on.

We should also, I would suggest, familiarize ourselves with the latest books in our respective areas of management. Here, I would point out that I am not referring to those texts that in many business schools are known as “Heathrow management theory,” a reference to the management books that one buys in airports. Rather I am referring to the many substantive, intellectual writings that are available from a wide variety of publishers. Engaging with this type of literature will not only strengthen our research, it will also help enhance our teaching in that the material we will be providing to our students will be at “the cutting edge” of theoretical developments. For those of you who may see yourselves as more practically oriented, there are also benefits to any consulting that you may do in that practicing managers want to be familiar with the latest developments. It is no coincidence that there is a high correlation between business schools identified as strong research institutions and those identified as the leaders in consulting and executive development programs.

I must point out, however, that my emphasis on becoming conversant with the literature in the field of management should not be construed to mean that we shouldn’t read our own journal and others that have emerged in our field. The *Journal of Sport Management* is our flagship and in my opinion the leading

journal in the area. Given the recent surge of interest in sport management and the emergence of journals such as *Sport Marketing Quarterly*, the *European Journal of Sport Management*, and *Managing Leisure*, we need to work to maintain this position. To do this we need to use current concepts and theories from the broader field as both a backdrop against which to critically appraise our own work and as a tool with which to extend and strengthen this work.

Another way in which we will help our quest to become the leading experts on the management of the sport industry is to hold our work up to the scrutiny of the outside world. While I strongly encourage each of you to continue to support our conference and certainly as one of the editors of *JSM* I want you to support our journal, I also realize, however, that academics do not limit themselves to just one conference or restrict their publications to a single journal. Consequently, I am a strong advocate for those of us in sport management presenting our work at the top management conferences such as the Academy of Management, the EGOS (European Group on Organization Studies) Conference, or the World Marketing Congress. I also believe that we must make a concerted effort to publish some of our work in the leading management journals such as those I just mentioned. Presenting our work in these arenas will enable us to gain feedback from mainstream management scholars and also allow us to demonstrate to them, some of whom undoubtedly question our academic credibility, the rigorous nature of our work.

However, this is not a one-way street. As well as promoting our field in the broader realm of management, we must also strive to attract the leading management scholars to our conferences and to publish in our journal. We can do this by demonstrating the viability of our field and the utility of sport organizations as a site for testing and extending theories on a wide variety of managerial topics.

Linked somewhat to my ideas about developing stronger ties with the field of management, I would also like to suggest that another factor that will help give our field credibility and move it forward is if we see more sport management scholars teaching in business schools and more business school people teaching on sport management programs. While I do not wish to overly personalize my paper, I can tell you that my own experience teaching on MBA programs and working with other faculty and graduate students in our business school at the University of Alberta and in the Centre for Corporate Strategy and Change at Warwick Business School has helped me a great deal in whatever small contribution I have been able to make to scholarship in sport management. It has also helped me and my colleagues in the establishment of an MBA program with a major in sport and leisure management, which is offered through the business school at the University of Alberta. Such innovations, I strongly believe, are a very positive contribution to our field.

A third concern, that I believe, we must address, if we are to move our field forward, relates to the topics we study in our research. While a definitive analysis of the subject areas that have predominated in our field is at best difficult, and at worst impossible, a cursory overview of the *Journal of Sport Management* and previous NASSM Conference programs reveals that issues related to sport management curricula and to the careers of sport management graduates have been our primary concern. While not wishing to downplay the importance of a sound curriculum or some knowledge of the success of our graduates, it would

appear to me that these topics have received a disproportionate amount of attention. These are not central issues in management, nor are they representative of the type of concerns that practicing managers face. Rather they appear to be attempts to legitimate our field, something we would have to be less concerned about if we broadened our domain of operation and focused on issues that are both more congruent with mainstream management theory and more closely aligned with the needs of practicing managers—two objectives that are by no means incompatible.

What then should we be focusing on in our research? What are the central topics that we need to address? In many ways the answers to these questions are limitless and a familiarity with the leading management journals would reveal the range of topics available to us. Although we do not necessarily need to restrict our inquiry to these topics, I do believe that there is a demonstrable and significant overlap between them and those of relevance to our field. Nevertheless, let me briefly provide a few examples that are by no means definitive but reflect my own position as an organizational theorist as to the type of work I believe we should be pursuing.

In many ways one of the central concerns of any manager, because of its inherent link to performance, is the formulation and implementation of organizational strategy. Mintzberg (1987) has noted that all managers, whether they know it or not, develop strategies for their organization. In addition, strategy has also been shown to be tied to organizational structure and design (Chandler, 1962; Miles & Snow, 1978); it influences and is influenced by organizational culture (Schein, 1983), is mediated by technology (Scarborough & Corbett, 1992), and has been shown to have strong links to leadership (Leavy & Wilson, 1994). Yet, despite the centrality of strategy to the operations of all organizations within the sport industry and the links strategy has to other organizational phenomena, there have been very few studies of this topic in our field. Whether it be studies of the strategies an athletic footwear company such as Reebok is using to penetrate new markets, a study of the strategy groups such as the Canadian Olympic Association and the Atlanta Games Organizing Committee use to obtain corporate sponsorship, or research into the way small sporting goods stores strategize to survive in a recessionary environment is not important. The point is that studies of the strategies used by sport organizations would not only be useful in our field, but research of this nature could also be used to extend existing concepts and theories about this important topic.

Much of the existing work on organizational strategy has come from the industrial organizational economics school best characterized by the work of Michael Porter (1980, 1985) or from researchers such as Prahalad and Hamel (1990), Mahoney and Pandian (1992) or Peteraf (1993) who favor the more current resource-based view of strategy. Both of these approaches stress competitive strategy as a source of competitive advantage. However, a number of researchers (Faulkner, 1995; Norhia & Eccles, 1992) have suggested that cooperative strategies may be just as important as a means of gaining an advantage in the marketplace. These writers have stressed the importance of understanding the different types of interorganizational relationships in which companies are involved in order to control environmental uncertainty. These types of relationships are becoming increasingly common in sport and are, I believe, worthy of our attention. Organizations such as the NHL, NBA, NFL, and MLB are, for example,

creating joint ventures, strategic partnerships, licensing agreements, or loose cooperative networks with a variety of broadcasters, merchandising companies, sponsors, and community groups. Such relationships enable these professional sport leagues to penetrate new markets, increase their legitimacy, sell licensed merchandise and influence nonconsumer audiences. Nonetheless, they have received no attention from scholars in our field.

A similar dearth exists in the study of the impact that technology has had on sport organizations. There is not a single sport organization in North America that has not been touched by technology. Whether it be Reebok with its sophisticated computerized materials handling system or the local sports club that has computerized its membership list, all sport organizations are influenced by the changes that have occurred in microelectronic technologies. Yet, to the best of my knowledge, there is not a single article within our field that looks at the impact of technological innovations on the structure and processes of sport organizations.

Organizational culture is yet another topic on which there is a relative void of information in our field. The study of culture is inherently appealing to macro-organizational theorists because it brings the concept of human agency into the field without resorting to psychological models of human behavior. It is also "widely accepted by managers because [it] describes organizational realities that are hard to define but very relevant to running an organization" (Robey, 1986, p. 427). There has been considerable work on culture in mainstream organizational theory, and sports organizations offer a very viable site for testing and extending these theories. Yet, there has been virtually no work in our field on this topic.

Power and politics is also an area into which, I believe, we need to expand our focus of inquiry. All organizations are political. Sport organizations are no exception, and as Kanter (1979) has noted, power is critical for effective managerial behavior. Whether we study the type of power that someone such as the late Horst Dassler exercised over the IOC, the power of a TV network to influence the nature of sporting competitions, or the political struggles between different factions of sport organizations, is not important. All are worthy of our attention. Since the time of Weber's writings on charismatic and legal-rational authority, organizational theorists have recognized the importance of understanding the role of power and politics in shaping the structure and operations of an organization, yet these topics have received scant attention in our field.

Strategy, interorganizational relations, culture, power, and politics are then just examples of the type of topics that I believe we as sport management scholars should be studying. To these I could add such other current topics as total quality management, business process reengineering, sexuality and organizations, human resources management, and service quality, to name but a few. My point is not to provide some sort of definitive list of topics to study but merely to stress the potential our field offers and the need for us to engage with research topics that will help us meet this potential.

In this final section I would like to argue that any expansion of the type of organizations we study and any broadening of the topics we choose to research will require a concomitant change in the approaches to research that we choose to employ. As a reviewer for several journals I see a fairly large number of articles that are submitted for publication. While I have not systematically monitored the approaches used in these articles, I would venture to suggest that the dominant

mode of inquiry is survey research using questionnaires or some socio-psychological instrument. While there is nothing wrong with questionnaire research, I believe that its disproportionate use in our field limits our ability to fully comprehend the reality of sport organizations and their management. It is my contention that we need to broaden the approaches to research that we use in our field. As with the topics we study, there are a wide variety of different approaches available to us. While I do not wish to privilege one approach over the other, I would like to provide a couple of examples of what I mean when I call for a broadening of our approaches to research.

One of the criticisms that has been levelled at the type of work that we do is its over-reliance on quantitative approaches (Olafson, 1990). I agree and would certainly support the call for more qualitative studies. While there are several ways of gathering and utilizing qualitative data, one approach that I believe has considerable merit for the study of organizations in our field is the biographical approach being promoted by John Kimberly from the Wharton Business School. The essence of the biographical approach is to understand how an organization's past shapes its present and constrains its future. The biographer places his or her subject (in our case a sport organization) "in a historical context and traces how the subject both shaped and was shaped by external and internal events and forces" (Kimberly & Bouchikhi, 1995, p. 10). As such, the focus of the biographical approach is on a single organization. This organization is selected not because of the nature of the organization per se but because of the nature of the changing organizational conditions and demands it faces. An emphasis is placed not only on the commonalities that the focal organization has with other organizations but on its unique features. Adopting this type of logic would be a welcome addition and change to the dominant approach found in many of our studies. It is interesting to note that in the 9 years of our journal, we have had only one article in which one can actually identify the organization being studied. Usually the data presented have little theoretical underpinning and have been aggregated through a variety of statistical treatments that the reality of organizational life is lost in a myriad of numbers.

Another approach that I feel has been underutilized in our field is the analysis of secondary data. In the last few years I have become increasingly cognizant of the vast amount of data that is available about sport organizations in the popular press, in business journals such as *Forbes*, *Fortune*, and *Business Week*, in trade journals such as *Ad Age*, *Stores*, or *Marketing*, and in company annual reports and related documents. This is a readily available source of data that I believe we have made insufficient use of in our work.

There are other points I could make. I could, for example, argue for more work that uses critical theory to study sport organizations, more ethnographic work, or more studies that use advanced computer programs such as LISREL. As I noted earlier, my point is not to privilege one research approach over another but merely to appeal for the use of a wider range of approaches in the work we do.

In conclusion then, I would like to say, I feel our field has made great strides over the last 10 years. We have a very successful conference, we produce the leading journal in the field, we have a program review registry up and running, and are beginning to establish links with the European Association for Sport Management and other similar groups. However, I feel our research has not

moved at a similar pace. Our field is still dominated by descriptive surveys, many of which restrict their focus to athletic or physical education organizations. If we are to move sport management forward into the next 10 years, then, as I have outlined, I believe we need to expand the domain of our operations to encompass all those organizations that make up the sport industry. We need to provide a strong theoretical base to our research, establish a place for our studies in mainstream management, broaden the topics on which we focus, and utilize new approaches to research.

Some of you may no doubt see my suggestions as overly ambitious; some of you may see them as unreasonable. If so, then let me leave you with a slight paraphrase of a quote from playwright George Bernard Shaw (1903). Shaw suggested that reasonable people adapt themselves to the world; unreasonable people persist in trying to adapt the world to themselves. Therefore, all progress depends on unreasonable people.

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