



Community benefits from sport?

The incorporation of community-based sports and leisure development in regeneration strategies has considerable potential. This article looks at the experience in this region and elsewhere and the evidence for impact on social welfare.

Sport and social benefits

There is a widespread belief that sport is good for you (sporting injuries notwithstanding), but there is also a dimension of public policy founded upon the conviction that benefits accrue beyond the individual.

Over the past three decades one of the recurring rationales attached to the support for sport has been its role in promoting social welfare (Table 1). This derives from the externalities or social benefits that may accrue from sports provision.

Arguably, ideas of social welfare and community benefit have been less prominent in the minds of policymakers in recent years, overtaken by the themes of ‘civic boosterism’, prestige, and regeneration. Just as with other leisure-related initiatives like the garden festivals, the European City of Culture (Glasgow), and a host of other large scale arts festivals, interest in sport has secured the hosting of the Commonwealth Games, the World Student Games and the European [soccer] Championships as well as bids to host the Olympic and Commonwealth Games, and most recently the World Cup (again).

Whether or not being European City of Culture had any lasting benefits for Glasgow has been the subject of fierce debate, and the fact that the garden festivals have been discontinued suggests that decisionmakers were not persuaded of their regenerative powers. While enjoying the World Student Games in Sheffield and the associated cultural activity, Critcher (1992) concluded that their regenerative function is open to question.

Bottom-up approaches

However, there are still many initiatives wedded to the idea of using sport as an

Table 1: Some of the benefits attributed to sports initiatives

Top down (‘prestige’)	Bottom up (‘community’)
Provide prestige facilities and events	Enhance confidence and self-esteem
Improve environment	Improve employment prospects
Generate employment and income	Reduce crime, vandalism and delinquency
Enhance city image	Increase social integration and co-operation, promoting a collective identity
Attract visitors and relocating companies	Increase productivity with a fit and healthy workforce
Encourage civic pride	Improve health

element in bottom up approaches to local regeneration. Pack (1989) argued that sport “...can, in conjunction with other social and economic policies, make a positive contribution to urban regeneration.” This conviction is evident in many Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) initiatives which incorporate community-based sports development as an element of a broader economic, social and environmental strategy. There is widespread commitment to the notion that sport can play a key role in community development, in giving power to local community groups and giving participants a say in how local opportunities are managed.

Reporting elsewhere (Long and Sanderson, 1996) on the responses of sports development officers and sports centre managers, we noted that while all our respondents were able to cite a range of benefits to individuals: “...they found it harder to identify those occurring at the community level, and when addressing the contribution to regeneration, were more likely to return to high level sport—prestige facilities and elite performance (cups and Olympic medals). The responses relating to community development clustered strongly around interaction/cohesion/community spirit, whereas those relating to urban regeneration tended to focus on civic pride and improving the profile of the city.”

Although our local authority respondents talked a good case, they lacked any definitive evidence in support of their claims. This is something they share with the rapidly expanding literature on sport and leisure. However, many respondents referred to experiential evidence arising from their own participation in sport or direct observation in the course of their daily work. Although econometric models have been developed to try to estimate the impacts of major sporting events or new facilities, the

production of any ‘hard’ evidence in this area is problematic. So we wondered if it might be possible to engage in a more formal documentation of that experiential evidence to help to clarify the situation and identify the kinds of processes that work.

A sports centre case study

Part of an attempt to do this included a case study at ‘Walston’ Sports Centre (fictitious name). This is one of few facilities on one of those estates labelled as ‘inner city’ without being anywhere near the city centre. The youngsters causing problems around the estate were causing problems at the centre as well.

The centre was actually contributing to the problem, offering another area of authority to be targeted. This reflects polarised positions – ‘not part of us, so we attack it’. So the centre staff worked in conjunction with the local youth workers to set up a programme for the youngsters to get something from the centre and recognise that it is not a negative place to be. A weights room was set-up which was led by them and they actually raised three quarters of the funding. It is now well used.

The first changes were only small – the centre itself did cease to be a target (they even get on well with the security guard now). However, it did signal an altered state of mind and persuade other customers it was all right to return so that they were allowed once again to do what elsewhere would be a normal part of everyday life, and the attendance figures rose.

But the centre staff did not think this had led to a general improvement in the area. On the other hand they did argue that “...they’re not out there doing damage ...they’ve changed their attitude”. And there is the potential for education – the role of sport in developing self-discipline. It tends to be the (male) youth that is most commonly associated with ‘problems’, but they are not



alone in experiencing the problems of life on the estate. The centre does provide for other groups as well, like the young at heart women's group "...who wouldn't normally be doing activities, they'd stop at home, so at least they're coming out and getting involved with other people". Thus, the socialisation functions of many such programmes are likely to be as important as any health benefits.

Community-based sports development

Broadening the focus, there are numerous examples throughout Yorkshire and Humberside of community-based sports development. Basically, community development approaches aim to mobilise local people and resources by enabling individuals and groups to develop through participation in sporting activity, which is therefore seen as playing a role in developing community identity and capacity to take action and change. A major theme in community sports development is the training of community members as sports leaders and this approach has been promoted, for example, in Sheffield and Hull. In Sheffield, 'Women Leading the Way' is a partnership community-based training programme for women sports leaders aimed at increasing sporting opportunities for young people.

As indicated earlier, many SRB projects in the region have included sports development as an integral component of broader regeneration strategies for localities. An example is provided by Hull City Vision which includes initiatives to encourage participation within localities in active and healthy lifestyles and development of the range and quality of recreation and leisure facilities serving local communities.

Sport and crime

An important recurring theme of community sports development is its potential role in diverting young people from crime and drugs. Hull and Kirklees provide examples of summer holiday activity programmes for young people of school age delivered in partnership with the police. Here again, though, there is a lack of evidence indicating the effectiveness of sports programmes in reducing crime.

However, a recent evaluation of the West Yorkshire Sports Counselling project, established in 1991 with the aim of using sport to reduce rates of re-offending by Probation Service clients, found that those

who completed eight weeks or more of their sports counselling programme were significantly less likely to be re-convicted than a control group. It was the length of the programme combined with voluntary involvement and one-to-one counselling that proved to be important in helping participants gain in self-esteem and perceptions of their own fitness. Participants were also introduced to new social networks, role models and opportunities.

As with the efforts at the Walston Centre, the number of people involved has been relatively small; 46 in 1994 and 40 in 1995 completed a programme that by then covered all five districts of West Yorkshire. In an apparent effort to increase 'throughput', the current phase of the project is based around four week programmes, even though the research found that these benefits were not evident among those who took part for less than eight weeks (Nichols and Taylor, 1996).

Recent research in New Zealand has cast doubt on the effectiveness of sport as a means of diverting young people from anti social activities. Indeed, it was concluded that involvement in sport encourages aggressiveness and even cheating and 15-year olds with high sporting levels were twice as likely as their less sporty counterparts to be delinquent at the age of 18 (Guardian, 12th December, 1996).

Prospects

Although there is now considerable experience among local authorities and their partners of community-based sport and recreation development, there is still a lack of hard evidence on the impact of such initiatives. Allison and Coalter (1996) caution against over-optimism: "*The lesson from Action Sport is that the shift from attempting to provide sporting opportunities at a local level for disadvantaged groups to the instrumental use of sport within community development programmes is fraught with dangers.*"

Part of the problem is a general tendency in local government to give a low priority to evaluation; the focus is on action, often driven by political commitment in a context of constrained resources (Sanderson and Bovaird, 1996). Moreover, many of the claimed economic and social impacts of sport are difficult to measure and attribute to particular initiatives; evaluation research in such a context is technically difficult and can be expensive. And, although many

initiatives are of short-term duration, their broader impacts may take a long time to materialise; "*fabric renewal can be accomplished quickly. But social renewal takes a long time*" (Davies, 1989).

There is clearly a need for careful evaluation research to investigate the potential role of community-based sport in social renewal. Such research should be focused on local schemes, involving initial baselining, tracking of effects over an extended time period, coupled with in-depth qualitative investigation and informed by a broad conceptual framework of the potential economic and social benefits from sport. Over time this would provide a firmer basis for developing local policies for community sport and leisure in the context of broader regeneration strategies.

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