

Creating New Sport Opportunities for Girls: Resource Acquisition and Mobilization Across Competitive Environments

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Adolescent sport participants, particularly girls, continue to drop out of sport at alarmingly high rates, which presents an opportunity for new sport programs to enter the marketplace to better cater to those participants. Starting new sport programs, however, presents significant challenges, including acquiring and mobilizing resources in innovative ways. Using theory in sport development and the resource-based view, the authors examined six emergent sport programs for girls within the United States and United Kingdom to identify the resources obtained and mobilized to create new and distinctive sport opportunities in a crowded marketplace. Following a case study approach, data from site visits and interviews with 137 individuals were analyzed using within- and across-case analysis. The findings reveal the resources needed to grow the programs, the ways in which those resources are attained, and strategies to mobilize resource bundles to maximize sport opportunities by differentiating programs from traditional, mainstream sport opportunities. The findings also highlight the distinctive opportunities and challenges for sport organizers in both top-down and bottom-up sport development systems. This study informs theory in sport development and provides insight for creatively designing and delivering sport opportunities that expand overall sport participation for adolescent girls.

Keywords: adolescent sport, competitive advantage, nontraditional sport, resource-based view, sport development, women's sport

Although millions of children (age 12 and below) around the world participate in a wide range of sports (Australian Sports Commission, 2017; Department for Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport [UK], n.d.), the dropout rates for adolescents (aged 13–18 years) remain high. In fact, estimates suggest that 50–80% of young people are no longer participating in sport by 15–17 years old (Australian Sports Commission, 2017; Crane & Temple, 2015), and the rates are even higher for girls (The Aspen Institute, 2015). Among a variety of reasons, some drop out because they are selected out (cut) from increasingly competitive teams, while others report that sport was no longer fun or that they wanted to pursue other interests (Crane & Temple, 2015). In addition, early sport specialization has led not only to increased competition for limited participation opportunities, but also to high levels of dropout in adolescents, particularly girls (Hyman, 2012).

Building and sustaining new sport opportunities falls within the theoretical and practical realm of sport development. Sport development systems are built by creating and sustaining pathways by which athletes enter a sport, find benefits from their participation that keep them involved in the sport, become increasingly identified with and committed to the sport, and move within the sport in order to participate at an appropriate and desired level of skill and competition (Brouwers, Sotiriadou, & De Bosscher, 2015; Green,

2005; Shilbury, Sotiriadou, & Green, 2008). The most common entry point for participants occurs through local sport clubs, with supplemental training available to children as young as 18 months (Longevity Sports Center, 2018), progressing to elite travel teams, beginning with slightly older (approximately 7–8 years and above) participants. These clubs, while they claim to be effective for increasing skills and preparing athletes for advanced competition, can be costly and require a significant time investment (Chalip & Green, 1998; Dixon, 2018; Hyman, 2012).

In the adolescent years, both club sport and school sport are important participation sites. In the United States, public (i.e., taxpayer-funded) schools provide tuition-free education and sport opportunities for students; thus, school sport is considered to provide equal opportunities for participants of all genders, ethnicities, and social classes (Bowers, Chalip, & Green, 2010). Yet, limited roster spots and early specialization lead to high adolescent dropout rates, particularly among girls (The Aspen Institute, 2015; Dixon, 2018). In the United Kingdom, like much of the world, sport has traditionally been delivered through an elaborate club system, whereby resources are provided by the government to invest in both grassroots and Olympic/Paralympic elite talent pathways (Sport England, 2018; U.K. Sport, 2015). However, in these kinds of club systems, resources are not necessarily readily available, particularly in developing nondomestic or emergent sports, such as flag football; thus, the number and type of sport offerings can be limited.

From a sport development perspective, the centrality of school sport and the often elite-centric approach of national sport bodies both work to inadvertently discourage participation as one ages. Like all true pyramid models, the number of opportunities

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(i.e., places on a team and number of teams) is largest at the base of the pyramid (largely where children are first introduced to sport) and gradually shrinks as the competitive level rises and opportunities become more selective. Although pyramid analogies for sport development are ostensibly based on competitive skill levels, in practice, the levels tend to be associated with age groups. Thus, mass sport programs for beginners are nearly always designed for children. As programs at each level become more selective, athletes leave the system, as there are few opportunities to move horizontally to continue to play as one ages (Bowers et al., 2010). In this way, the number of exit points far exceeds the number of entry points (Bowers et al., 2010; Green, 2005). Thus, the challenge for sport managers is to create more entry points across the lifespan, particularly entry points for adolescent girls, since they are the most subject to dropout in adolescent years.

One way to create or increase sport participation is through new or emerging sports. Nontraditional sports continue to attract girls; The Aspen Institute (2015) reported participation in “other sports” ranked first among girls. In these new sports, few participants have previous experience or high skill levels, thereby creating a more equal playing field. In this way, one might overcome the lack of efficacy felt by new participants. Yet, new sport programs must overcome significant barriers to entry, particularly when the sport provided does not have existing legitimacy or “cultural currency” (Chalip & Green, 1998). They must either create a program that appeals to individuals who are not attracted to existing sport programs, convinces athletes to switch programs, or targets athletes discarded by other programs. These are different market segments, which likely seek different types of experiences from their sport participation (Green, 1997). Thus, the specific structural choices, mobilization of resources, and psychosocial appeals created by program entrepreneurs situate sport programs in the broader competitive landscape and determine who is attracted to their programs, ultimately impacting program acceptability, legitimacy, and sustainability. In this way, new sport programs provide a fertile context to understand the relationship between differentiation strategies and program success.

Using theory in sport development and the resource-based view (RBV), the purpose of this study was to examine six new girls’ sport offerings within the United States and United Kingdom to identify the resources obtained and mobilized to create new and distinctive sport opportunities in a crowded marketplace. Combining theoretical frameworks from both sport development and strategic management (i.e., RBV) allows us to examine the issue of creating new sport opportunities, thus contributing to sport development theory and practice, considering the needs of individual organizations relative to their environments and with an eye toward the fundamental tasks of sport development (Green, 2005) pathways toward building new sport opportunities.

Sport Development Approaches

Green’s normative theory of sport development (2005) offers a framework for examining the core tasks of sport development: recruitment, retention, and transition of athletes. It too starts with the pyramid analogy, whereby athletes enter the system at the base and progress (or not) to increasingly more skilled and competitive programs. This framework is a microlevel framework, focusing on the experiences of athletes, while suggesting actions that sport programs and organizations can take to assist the athletes in navigating the system. It identifies the importance of significant others to

recruit athletes, while recognizing the importance of creating opportunities to participate via many smaller, local-level programs. The retention of athletes is suggested to be a function of the capacity to cater to multiple motivations, processes of socialization into program contexts, and development of commitment to the program and other participants. Finally, the theory highlights the need for linkages among programs and intentional assistance to help athletes find and become socialized into new contexts and levels of involvement.

Green’s theory was developed based on critical tasks shared by sport organizations across a range of providers and suggests the need for more coordination among providers to function as a system (Green, 2005). There is no assumption that these organizations are part of a single governance structure, nor that they have any obligation to implement policies or programs set forth by the national governing body for their sport. In other words, the organizations in Green’s theory are assumed to be part of a loosely linked, bottom-up sport system, albeit a haphazard system (cf. Bowers et al., 2010). The only limits on the number of local providers of any particular sport are a function of the providers’ capacity to attract enough participants and resources to sustain the organization. This can be difficult for new entrants; those outside of the traditional sport offerings in a community can find it difficult to establish themselves (e.g., Cohen, Brown, & Welty Peachey, 2012). However, because of their relative independence, organizations in bottom-up, market-driven systems have a great deal of flexibility in the ways that they choose to mobilize the resources they do have (May, Harris, & Collins, 2012).

The tasks identified by Green (2005) are consistent with the Attraction Retention Transition Nurturing model (Sotiriadou, Shilbury, & Quick, 2008), which also recognizes the importance of attracting and retaining participants. The Attraction Retention Transition Nurturing model is based on annual reports of national sport organizations (NSOs); it is a top-down model in that its underlying assumption is that NSOs’ intentions will be implemented via state, regional, and local sport organizations. In fact, these sport systems push policies and practices down to local-level providers (Skille, 2008), in many cases, using funding and other resource distribution policies to ensure common strategies and tactics across sport providers. Yet, as the Attraction Retention Transition Nurturing researchers noted, the intentions of the NSOs can “not be treated as definitive of all actual practices” (Sotiriadou et al., 2008, p. 251). Although sport organizations in top-down, centralized systems have less flexibility in their capacity to differentiate themselves from competitors, they tend to have more stable and sustainable resources than do providers in bottom-up, decentralized systems. Even when practices are linked to funding and other resources, local organizations can and must find ways to mobilize those resources in unique ways to create or maintain a competitive advantage over other providers (Truyens, De Bosscher, Heyndels, & Westerbeek, 2014).

Sport Development Theoretical Gaps: Resource Procurement and Mobilization

Top-down systems dominate the sport development landscape (cf. De Bosscher, Shibli, Westerbeek, & Van Bottenburg, 2015) and have been studied extensively. Nearly all of this work has focused on national-level sport policy to support elite sport development, with a number of authors developing frameworks to allow for cross-national comparisons of common characteristics (e.g., Bergsgard, Houlihan, Mangset, Nørdland, & Rommetvedt, 2007). While this

work has identified broad categories of resources common to national sport systems and has sought to equate those resources with competitive success, the broad national multisport scope of these studies does not allow for an examination of the ways in which resources are obtained and mobilized to create a competitive space or advantage for any particular sport or organization. More recently, sport management researchers have examined competitive advantage by investigating the relationship between the resources and capabilities of sport organizations and the competitive success of their teams and athletes (Böhlke & Robinson, 2009). In each case, the researchers focused on well-established sport organizations and sustained competitive advantage. Consequently, the results identify a variety of resource bundles used to gain a competitive advantage, including history, relationships, organizational culture, and efficiency (Smart & Wolfe, 2000). Truyens et al. (2014) went further, identifying 98 resources and capabilities used to develop a competitive advantage by national athletics organizations. Each of these studies provides insight into potential resources that could be used strategically to create a competitive advantage. However, none examine the ways in which specific organizations configure and mobilize their resources to be successful in the specific environment in which they operate. Further, nearly all of the research using the RBV to study competitive advantage in sport focuses on existing (often, longstanding) elite sport organizations. Typically, these organizations have already amassed numerous resources and have experience in the strategic mobilization of those resources. Yet, new (particularly nonelite) sport organizations have perhaps the most to gain from creative mobilization of their resources, as they are competing for resources in a crowded sport marketplace and have yet to create a competitive advantage at all, much less a sustainable one.

The RBV offers a compelling framework to understand how new sport organizations procure and mobilize essential resources to gain a foothold in a competitive environment. Leveraging this perspective in the current study will allow for an important advancement of sport development theory, particularly at the microlevel.

Resource-Based View

The RBV, with roots in the organizational economics literature, was originally focused on mobilizing the internal resources of the firm in order to maximize competitive success. Barney (1991) defined resources as “all assets, capabilities, organizational processes, firm attributes, information, knowledge, and so forth, controlled by a firm that enable the firm to conceive of and implement strategies that improve its efficiency and effectiveness” (p. 101). So, not all resources are necessarily key competitive resources. To be considered as such, the resource must be rare, valuable, difficult to imitate, and not substitutable (Barney, 1991). Further, the resources themselves are not always the source of competitive advantage. Rather, the ways in which the organization mobilizes its resources in ways that create value or exploit opportunities can result in competitive advantage (Fahy, 2000; Smart & Wolfe, 2000).

Thus, the perspective on resources can be utilized in situations where strategy is intentional and planned, whereby a firm leverages its existing resources to outpace a competitor (Barney, 1991; Bruton, Lan, & Lu, 2000). However, the perspective on resources can also be opportunistic, whereby program providers assess their environment and available resources and then make specific structural choices to exploit those unique resources and opportunities to situate their sport program in the broader competitive landscape (Hoskisson, Eden, Lau, & Wright, 2000). Such is the case in this study; the organizations assessed their internal resources against

their external environments and acquired, deployed, and managed their resources to create distinctly new opportunities. Bruton et al. (2000) argued that identifying the current resources within the firm, as well as the resources needed to grow the firm and create new opportunities, were both important dimensions of RBV.

Hunt and Morgan (1995) suggested that resources can be categorized as human, physical, financial, relational, organizational, legal, and informational. While the legal (e.g., contracts, licenses) and informational (e.g., collective knowledge of customers and competitors) resources are not particularly salient in this context, the other five resources encapsulate the resources likely utilized by sport clubs to obtain a competitive advantage. Therefore, the present study focuses on the remaining five resources to assess the human (e.g., skills and knowledge of individuals), physical (e.g., equipment, fields), organizational (e.g., competition level, culture), financial (e.g., funding, fees), and relational (e.g., partnerships) resources of the clubs.

Despite the original intent of the RBV, the application of this theoretical framework within the sport management literature has often been utilized not to identify advantages, but to remove disadvantages in an isomorphic space in order to avoid falling behind the competition (Gowthorp, Toohey, & Skinner, 2017). For instance, Houlihan (2013) argued that Olympic development programs are becoming increasingly isomorphic in their approaches to elite development, especially in the areas of sports science, technology, coaching, and state of the art facilities. With few exceptions, these best practice approaches have essentially embraced a goal of competitive parity rather than competitive advantage (see also Gowthorp et al., 2017; Houlihan, 2013). The assumption underlying the concept of best practice is that, to be successful, organizations should copy the practices of the leaders in their industry. While that mindset could indeed identify valuable resources, best practices imply that those resources are neither rare, nor difficult to imitate. Ergo, a focus on best practices is a focus on achieving competitive parity. However, to develop true innovations, programs need to do more than become like all the other programs; they need to differentiate themselves in some way that is not easily imitable, yet leads to legitimate sport offerings that attract participants (Dickson & Ginter, 1987).

The capacity to grow a firm and create new opportunities is determined by the resources of an organization and its strategies to deploy those resources within the unique competitive environment in which it functions (Barney, 1991; Bruton et al., 2000). Consequently, the RBV of the firm provides a useful framework for analysis of these programs. Thus, the present study utilizes RBV to consider the structures and resources needed to create new opportunities for girls in a crowded sport marketplace. This study contributes to our understanding of sport development theory via its focus on program differentiation by including organizations (i.e., program providers) within and across diverse industry contexts, which allows us to unpack social and structural factors that might not be apparent within a single competitive environment. Further, this approach allowed us to get beyond best practices (and potential isomorphism) to examine the resource patterns and mobilization that supported or detracted from new sport programs' ability to differentiate themselves.

Methods

Eisenhardt (1989) argued that case study methodology is appropriate for understanding complex issues in organizations, such as the ones in this study. This method calls for an in-depth analysis of

each case and then cross-case comparison and contrast. To identify and understand the structures and resources of these sport programs, we employed an intrinsic case study approach, whereby the goal was to fully explore and understand each given case (Stake, 2005). As a result, intrinsic case studies develop detailed descriptions of the case's own context and issues. Following this method, with the goal of detailed description, data collection at each site consisted of site visits and observation at games and practices, as well as in-depth interviews with central stakeholders (e.g., administrators, coaches, players, sponsors, parents).

Participants

Six organizations created to provide flag football programs for adolescent girls in the United States and United Kingdom were studied. The organizations provided only flag football programs for high school girls; therefore, the organizations and the programs are one and the same. The terms "organization" and "program" are therefore used interchangeably. None had yet become an official varsity school sport or sanctioned club offering, yet each showed significant demand for its program. The following four U.S. sites were examined: (a) Austin, TX; (b) New Orleans, LA; (c) Harrisburg, PA; and (d) Chicago, IL. The two British sites were (a) Kenilworth and (b) Coventry, both located in the County of Warwickshire, approximately 100 miles north of London. The six sites were distinctive in terms of the girls they served and the sociocultural milieu in which they existed. That is, these programs competed in dramatically different competitive environments. The programs were identified by initial contacts at USA Flag Football, researcher networks, and snowball sampling. The programs had to be new (within 2–3 years of start), demonstrate evidence of growth, and express a desire and information on how to develop to a sustainable sport entity. Each of the sites identified agreed to participate. One site that was initially identified, Las Vegas, was dropped due to program discontinuation before the start of the study.

The participants in the study included eight administrators (principals and program directors), eight coaches, two sponsors, 23 parents, and 96 athletes (six to eight athletes per team) from across the six sites. The athletes ranged in age from 14 to 18 years old, and all participants had 1–3 years of experience with their respective programs. Sponsors were only included at two sites (due to their high level of involvement with the program). At each site, at least one administrator, two to three parents, one coach, and 10–15 athletes were represented. In addition, every team within each program was included in the interviews such that we gathered a sample that would accurately reflect the demographics of each program.

The programs represent a wide range of locations and demographic profiles. The Austin, TX, site was a suburban, middle-class area. The Chicago, IL, site was an urban, all-girls private school that drew students with a range of demographic profiles from across the city. The New Orleans, LA, site was urban, primarily Black, with almost exclusively lower income schools. The Harrisburg, PA, site was suburban, with a racially diverse student population. The Coventry, U.K. site, was a suburban club program that drew students from across the local community. The Kenilworth, U.K. site, was a state secondary school in an affluent neighborhood. Both British programs were composed of students from primarily White, middle- to upper-income families.

Data Collection

Interviews. We utilized three separate interview protocols: one for administrators, coaches, and sponsors; one for parents; and one

for athletes. Following Green's (2005) normative sport development framework, we sought to understand the experiences of athletes and those surrounding the program, particularly those that informed resources and essential sport development issues. We asked administrators, coaches, and sponsors to explain the purpose of the flag football program, the program structure, the resources needed for implementation, barriers to implementation, and successes/challenges. For example, we asked them how they recruited athletes, who and how the programs were provided, and whether participants stayed in the program (and why/why not). Based on the RBV, we also asked a number of questions about resources in the program and had several interview probes about resources when discussing barriers with the participants (e.g., a number of them mentioned a lack of practice space as a barrier, which led to additional questions about resources they either had or felt they needed). All parties (administrator, coach, and sponsor) were asked about every aspect of the program, although not every party answered questions about every aspect of the program.

Again, following Green (2005), parent interviews captured parents' motives to enroll their daughter in the program, their perceptions of their daughter's experience, and their perceptions of the program design and implementation (e.g., resources, limitations, opportunities, personnel). We asked athletes to describe their reasons for participating, their experiences with the program and sport, and what made this sport experience different from others they had tried.

Observations and field notes. Site visits and observations of games and practices were utilized to build a rapport with the participants and to gain an appreciation and "feel" for each context (Stake, 2005). Observational data provided insight into the structural elements, such as game facilities and atmosphere, practice facilities, and interactions between various parties. As the study progressed, these observations became more structured and focused on the pertinent issues. During all observations, the researchers documented the events, date, time, setting, and people involved. We recorded the observations through field notes, which took the form of jottings and notations, with some verbatim sentence quotes. While the data as a whole were useful for understanding and contextualizing each case (Eisenhardt, 1989; Stake, 2005), the data analysis and results for the current study are predominantly based upon the interviews.

Data Analysis

The interviews were audio recorded and professionally transcribed. Two researchers then independently hand-coded the transcriptions. In the first pass of coding, the transcriptions were examined with a mix of theoretical and open coding (Charmaz, 2006). In this process, we coded for themes consistent with Green's (2005) normative theory. For example, themes such as "participant recruitment mechanisms" were utilized to code the data. Other themes, such as "important program milestones," emerged from the data as participants told the unfolding story of the organization. This initial coding process allowed us to garner a basic understanding of each case and how it was situated in its competitive environment and in the lives of the various stakeholders. Thus, it not only was helpful for the initial examination, but also ultimately proved valuable for understanding why/how the resources in each program contributed to program success in its competitive environment.

The second pass of coding consisted of a closed-coding process (Charmaz, 2006). In keeping with the RBV, we utilized theoretical coding to organize the data according to the following codes: human resources, financial structure and resources,

relational resources, physical resources, and organizational resources. Theoretical coding allowed for the utilization of concepts and categories that were prevalent in the literature. For example, we coded for human resources by first identifying all the human resources mentioned in the interviews and field notes and then by categorizing these by type of resource (e.g., founder, coach). Once we had coded all of the interviews, we compared the initial codes with one another, discussed and resolved any coding discrepancies, and recoded for consistency.

We conducted the analysis in three phases (Eisenhardt, 1989). First, we examined the data within each site to obtain an understanding of each program, its resources, and its competitive environment. Next, we compared the resources available across sites and the ways in which the distinctive environments affected the mobilization of resources. This helped us understand the similarities and differences across programs, competitive environments, and resource availability. Finally, we integrated this analysis with the initial open-coding process (program elements, milestones, etc.) to analyze the impact of resources and mobilization thereof on the success of programs in creating or maintaining a competitive advantage.

In an effort to improve the trustworthiness and credibility of this study, we engaged in several steps based upon the evaluative criteria outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Specifically, we utilized prolonged engagement, triangulation, and peer debriefing to establish credibility. We spent sufficient time in the field to understand the social setting and organizational culture. Furthermore, depth was aided by the use of triangulation of sources from a variety of contexts (i.e., site locations) and people (i.e., players, coaches, administrators). Finally, two peer debriefers reviewed and discussed the codes, themes, and interpretations.

Results

The following sections describe the programs in terms of their structures, resources, and competitive environments. We have begun with an examination of the competitive environments in which these programs are embedded and then we examined the relevant structures and resources within each program and concluded by exploring the salient resources across programs that work toward leveraging competitive advantage in their relative environments.

Competitive Environment

It is impossible to evaluate the adequacy of organizational resources without first understanding the external environment in which the organization competes. The case studies examined in this research share some similarities in that they are part of the youth sport industry. All programs directly compete for customers (i.e., participants) and resources, with other sport offerings targeting girls in this age group. For the most part, these consist of either school- or club-based programs providing flag football or other sports. Three of the programs (Chicago, Harrisburg, and New Orleans) are offered through the school. They compete for participants and resources with other sports offered in the school—largely well-established varsity and junior varsity sports. None of the flag football programs had achieved varsity status. The Chicago program was implemented as an after-school club, competing with varsity sports, as well as nonsport clubs, for its participants and resources. Harrisburg's program held intramural status in the schools and competed with varsity and other intramural sports.

The New Orleans program had the most visible presence, as schools from across the district fielded teams for a district-wide league competition; consequently, it was most similar to varsity sport. Despite the interschool competition, the program was not afforded varsity status or the resources provided to varsity teams, yet it competed with those programs for participants.

Two programs were considered school/club hybrids (Austin and Kenilworth) because teams were clearly identified with specific schools and used school facilities, but had no official linkage with the school. These teams competed with official school teams, but without official school support. One (Kenilworth) also competed directly with the local flag club program, the Coventry program. The Coventry program was the only fully private club in the study. As such, its main competition was other club sports, but it did face some competition from school sport. Although the club fielded a number of teams, both male and female, its main competitor for high school-age females was the other U.K. program in this study, Kenilworth.

All six programs compete with school- and club-based programs in a variety of sports, not just flag football. In fact, the availability, profile, and cultural significance of football varied by context. Ergo, the environmental contingencies faced by each organization also varied in important ways. Some environments had existing youth (usually coed) flag football leagues; therefore, the sport was available, at least until the participants were too old to participate in these leagues. Therefore, the environment itself produced a latent demand for the sport. The American programs were forced to compete with traditional varsity sport contexts for players and resources. The status, tradition, and longevity of varsity sport programs effectively served a small pool of athletes who had been active in their sport for many years already. This unintentionally created demand for additional, perhaps nontraditional, sport opportunities for girls who had not been part of the system.

The flag football programs examined here are recent entrants into their competitive environments. This, combined with the targeted age group, resulted in significant challenges to obtain a competitive space or advantage. Traditionally, programs for high school-aged youth are part of a larger development pathway for sport participants. They depend on programs for younger participants to recruit others into the sport. In this way, programs seek to attract talented athletes into their organization by selecting from an existing pool of athletes. The programs studied did not yet have an established pathway for talent development. Consequently, they could not compete effectively with more established sport programs without differentiating themselves in some way. The ways in which they attempted to do so varied based on the specific elements of their respective competitive environments, which not only shapes the resources available to each organization, but also necessitates the unique mobilization of those resources to create a competitive advantage. The next section describes the resources of each program.

Within-Case Examination

A comprehensive overview of the six types of programs included in this study and their structures and resources are presented in the [Appendix](#). The data are drawn verbatim from administrator, parent, coach, and player descriptions of the programs, along with the extensive field notes and on-site observations. An examination of the data reveals that, across all six sites, all five types of resources both exist and are mobilized in various ways to achieve traction in their environment. However, it is unclear just from this examination

what resources make a difference toward program success. A cross-case examination is therefore employed next.

Cross-Case Comparison by Structures and Resources

In this section, we examined the core similarities in resources and structures across programs in order to understand the baseline resources that are essential to build programs. We also examined the salient differentiation strategies in structures, resources, and mobilization of resources across programs that are being leveraged in order to survive and grow in their particular competitive environment.

Human resources. All programs shared the following two critical human resources: a program champion and coaches. These are valuable resources, but they are in no way rare. It is in the mobilization and capacity of these resources that the programs differ and differ in ways that are shaped by their competitive environment.

Program champion. Our results demonstrate the essential role played by persons who took the initiative to champion the formation, development, and maintenance of a girl's football program. We call such individuals "program champions," as they are persons who passionately seek to promote the sport for girls and to make it thrive (cf. Molloy, 2018). Program champions were necessarily driven to create and implement the programs, but the key driver varied. Some were driven by their enthusiasm for the sport, as in the case of the Chicago and Kenilworth programs. For example, the Kenilworth program champion said, "I love American football and I want every kid in the UK to fall in love with football. If I need to build clubs from the ground up to make that happen, so be it!" Others were parents driven to create opportunities for their children (i.e., Austin and Harrisburg). Coventry's program champion was both an enthusiast for the sport and a parent of girls wanting to play. The New Orleans program champion expanded his portfolio to develop and administer the flag football program to provide more opportunities for girls to participate in sport.

In each case, the program champion played an essential role in starting, growing, and sustaining the program. However, the extent to which the program champion had acquired other human resources to support the program differed across organizations. These differences were largely a function of their environment. Due to his official position within the school system, the New Orleans program champion was able to recruit additional program staff within the schools in his district to support the program. Conversely, the Chicago program relied solely on the program champion despite garnering verbal support from the school. The Austin program champion recruited a coaching director, who serves as the league commissioner, and team moms to support each of the seven teams. Program champions inside the school typically were better able to mobilize others to support and facilitate the programs. All program champions used their personal networks to obtain human resources, and none were confident in the sustainability of their program if they were to step aside. Coventry, Austin, Harrisburg, and New Orleans had created linkages with parent boards, the schools, and embedded school structures in their quest for sustainability. However, in Kenilworth and Chicago, the programs remained at risk due to the heavy reliance on a single-program champion to both garner resources and deliver the program.

Although differences across the programs are salient, it is useful to notice what they have in common, which is an individual

who is committed enough to enable a program to generate and develop. The differences among the programs are simply differences in context and contingencies. The program champions negotiated whatever contexts and contingencies they faced in order to make their programs feasible. In that sense, the differences are superficial; they are what needed to be addressed in each instance. The presence of entrepreneurial vision and strategic efforts to use and, where necessary, overcome contexts and contingencies remained key to successful program implementation.

Coaches: Since it is nearly impossible to run an organized sport program without coaches of some kind, it is no surprise that all programs put a high value on coaches. Yet, the recruitment and training of coaches was strongly impacted by the context and competitive environment. Perhaps due to the start-up status of most of these organizations, the coaches tended to be sourced from the most convenient place. Four of the six program champions also coached in their program. In fact, neither Coventry nor Chicago recruited any other coaches, but relied solely on the program champion. In terms of strategic orientation within their contexts, this practice was effective for quality control, reduced training needs, easing financial costs and ease of coordination. However, it clearly limited program growth to the capacity of that one individual.

Two programs recruited from the schools. The Harrisburg program champion recruited boys high school players, former girls flag players, and parents of current players. This was a convenient source of coaches and reduced costs, but the coaches were neither highly trained nor motivated. As the program director from Harrisburg described, "I like the accessibility of boys' football players as coaches and the community it creates in our school and program, but high school boys are not always reliable, nor do they really have the training in coaching skills and tactics needed to be great." The participants also recognized this issue. The first-year girls said, "This season wasn't very organized because we went through so many coaches." New Orleans used traditional school-based recruiting, sourcing from the coaches and teachers in the schools. However, few coaches were available, as traditional varsity and junior varsity sports claimed those who were experienced and/or trained.

Both Austin and Kenilworth were embedded in a broader, local flag football community and recruited coaches from that community. The Austin program champion reached for her contacts in the local league. This enabled her to recruit experienced coaches, but the program and local youth seasons overlapped, creating scheduling conflicts and barriers for some. Only one program, Kenilworth, pursued coaches from beyond the program champion's personal network, garnering coaches from local universities. It is also the only program to provide coaches with formal training and certification opportunities. This was a double-edged sword, as it was an attractive recruitment tool, but increased turnover. Once the coaches were trained and BAFA certified, they were often recruited away to other programs.

In all cases, the programs had fewer human resources at their disposal than did their direct competitors. This affected their capacity to grow, the quality of their coaches, and the sustainability of their organization. Clearly, the programs relying solely on their program champions for coaching, administration, and strategic planning have little hope for long-term sustainability without expanding their human resources. The others currently seek to obtain parity with their competitors, a minimal step in sustaining their organization. And yet, their limited resources impact the manner in which they provide the sport experience for the

participants they serve. The limited coaching requires more training and sharing across the teams, enhancing the sense of community among players. An overreliance on the program champion has unintended consequences of providing immediate and ongoing feedback regarding strategic choices, allowing administrators to respond quickly to issues as they arise. The lack of human resources requires a scaled-back program when comparing sport opportunities in the schools and traditional club sports. And yet, it is this very feature that participants find so attractive—less time commitment, more inclusive opportunities to participate. None of these is costly to imitate, but organized sport programs rarely choose these program features.

Relational resources. In order to compete with the other sport organizations in their environments, program champions sought to build relationships to leverage the resources available to them. The source of relationships varied by program and environment, but mainly took the form of a partnership or alliance. Most of the time, the partnerships and alliances resulted in financial resources (typically in-kind), but also built the credibility and visibility of the program. The programs were more successful in leveraging their relationships when they were large (i.e., 50+ participants) and were able to claim some legitimacy as a partner. The schools were the critical relationship for every program except the Coventry program. Relationships with the schools are natural, as the clubs filled a service gap that the schools were not addressing. Ergo, the schools were seen more positively when they supported the girls' flag football programs. Good relationships with the schools led to (a) access to other resources, (b) access to participants, and (c) legitimacy. Yet, not all programs were able to mobilize these resources effectively.

Access to other resources: As noted above, several programs gained access to coaches via the schools (i.e., New Orleans and Harrisburg). In Austin, Harrisburg, and Chicago, relationships with the local schools provided physical resources, such as practice facilities and competition fields. Access to the same fields as their competitors, varsity sports, was an important source of competitive parity for these programs. The most extensive example of leveraging relationships is that of the New Orleans program. New Orleans was a school program with its champion holding a senior administrative role in the district. That gave him access to traditional channels of communication with school athletic directors to “sell” the flag program. He could not mandate schools' participation, but his existing relationships with school athletic directors gave him legitimacy, which opened doors to create relationships with new partners, such as potential sponsors. The champion's relationships resulting from his job-related network, such as with the New Orleans Sports Commission, provided opportunities, including the girls' being able to play at the National Football League (NFL) stadium for singular marquee games (an important physical resource), which then also provided publicity, notoriety, and legitimacy for the program. This helped to put the program on more equal footing with the varsity sport programs with whom it competed.

Access to participants: With the exception of Coventry, every program recruited participants via the schools. Both partners benefited greatly from this relationship. The schools were seen to expand the offerings provided to students, especially students not well served by official school sport programs. The programs were able to access potential participants, while gaining some legitimacy for the program. By recruiting in the schools, the programs were seen to have the support of a trusted institution. This gave them an advantage over other sport clubs that did not

have a relationship with the school. Further, it greatly simplified and reduced the costs of recruitment.

Legitimacy: The relationships and profile that the programs had within the schools provided a sense of support and legitimacy. Perhaps the most salient example of a positive partnership comes from the Kenilworth program. From the outset, the club was closely aligned with its local County Sports Partnership (CSP). The CSP funds were used to purchase flags, balls, and uniforms, as well as to pay coaches. The parents and program director agreed that reducing player costs would mitigate potential barriers to participation (Interview with Program Director, Parent 2, and Parent 3). The support of the CSP also gave the program credibility in the United Kingdom and helped open doors to access the target school of Kenilworth. The CSP is a well-known network of sport organizations. Thus, the relationship with the CSP gave the Kenilworth program legitimacy and equal status to its competitors. Similarly, in New Orleans and Austin, the integral relationships with the schools gave the programs legitimacy, as, much like varsity sport, they were representing their school in competition versus other schools. As one Austin participant said, “It's cool to be included in the school announcements on Monday morning, just like all the other athletes” (Interview with Austin Team 3).

Relationships, particularly for start-up organizations, are valuable in terms of the capacity to obtain other resources. All programs were able to mobilize their relationships in some way, although across organizations, it was solely the responsibility of the program champion. For emerging sport organizations to create and sustain a competitive advantage, they must find ways to institutionalize these relationships.

Financial resources. As with most start-up organizations, financial resources were the most salient need facing all six organizations. Across programs, the availability of financial resources was low. With the exception of the Kenilworth program, which had garnered support from a government grant, and the Chicago program, which did not charge any fees, the programs were dependent upon participant fees for their operations. All other financial resources were in-kind, in the form of free or discounted facilities (all programs), volunteer coaches (all but Kenilworth), NFL flag equipment (U.S. programs), and transportation (New Orleans). Although the programs shared similar financial needs, the ways in which they obtained needed resources was a function of their environment and the capabilities of each program champion.

Both Austin and Coventry competed mainly with other sport clubs. Sport clubs in both of these environments were commonly supported with membership or participation fees. Consequently, the participants (and their parents) expected to pay for expenses associated with participation. Both programs' champions were able to leverage existing relationships to obtain field space at no cost; Coventry trained at local parks, and Austin trained on the fringes of school fields. Two things combined to provide these programs with a competitive advantage: the ubiquity of club fees in their environment and their ability to keep costs low. In a sense, these programs had a cost advantage over their competitors. One parent explained that it would be expected that parents would drive their children to practice and games and that they would have to pay a club fee (Interview with Austin Parent). This club fee was extremely low in comparison to other competing club sports, like soccer or volleyball; thus, the club was able to attract girls who wanted a less expensive alternative. As these programs grow, it may be more difficult to maintain their cost advantage, particularly as increased demand is likely to drive up the cost of field rental.

The other four programs (Kenilworth, Harrisburg, New Orleans, and Chicago) received significant financial support from schools

and donations. The participant fees were minimal or nonexistent, which was important in a school-based context. The Kenilworth program relied heavily on a government grant to support all aspects of the program, and the school provided free practice fields (Interview with League Director). The Harrisburg program was supported by donors, including those donating their time and effort to administer the program and its teams, coach, and referee. The school provided the facilities at no cost, and equipment was donated by NFL Flag. The participants paid a small fee (\$25), which covered the cost of insurance and jerseys. Other minor costs were absorbed by the champion and participants' families. The New Orleans program was financially supported by the school district and its individual schools, which provided financial stability that the other programs lacked. The program was free to participants; they only needed to provide their own shorts and shoes. The school district provided the playing fields for free, and individual schools covered other costs. In addition, the program champion worked with strategic partners to garner donations to pay for the game facility, transportation, shirts, flags, and equipment (Interview with Program Director, Coach 3). It was even more important for the New Orleans program to be cost-free to participants, as the market served did not have the means to support the program or its participants. Finally, the Chicago program was fully supported by the school. It was considered a club, with all components available at the school, and competed with other school clubs, rather than other sports.

Although the primary financial resources of the six programs varied, all worked to keep costs low. As the programs were relatively new to the sports environment in their location, the low-cost strategy was more a necessity than a strategic choice. However, each of the programs was able to achieve at least competitive parity with respect to pricing, with some even creating a competitive advantage based on cost leadership.

Physical resources. Four physical resources are essential to any sport program: practice and game facilities, transportation, uniforms, and equipment. Being essential does not mean that they are equivalent across programs (see [Appendix](#)). Consequently, all programs, no matter their competitive environment, provided a place to train and compete, and the equipment necessary to do so. With the exception of Chicago, all programs provided uniforms. Transportation varied dramatically from program to program, largely following the standards set by a program's competitors. Each is discussed below.

Facilities: All sport teams need access to training facilities; therefore, the mere existence of a place to practice conveys no advantage. Rather, it is in the quantity/size, quality, and convenience of these spaces where programs have the opportunity to differentiate themselves. For the most part, the programs were not yet able to obtain competitive parity based on their practice facilities. All but Coventry used school-based facilities for training. Because they did not enjoy official varsity status, they were relegated to the smallest and poorest-kept fields, and access was never assured. The teams often found they were only able to use the fields if and when official varsity teams were not using them. When no fields were available, the teams were forced to either cancel practice or find an alternative space, such as a wide hallway or the front lawn of the school. Therefore, the programs whose competitive environment included school sports were at a distinct competitive disadvantage. Harrisburg had somewhat solved this issue by placing their league in the late spring, when all other competing-school playing seasons were over.

The programs competing against established clubs faced similar disadvantages. Competing club programs either own their own facilities or contract with existing facilities for access. Both of these options provided competitors with stable and consistent access to facilities that were not available to any of the programs in this study, except the Chicago program. With its official status as a school club, the Chicago program was allocated field space and did not have to compete with other sports for space. Kenilworth had consistent and stable access to high-quality school fields. The school had a plethora of fields and provided free access 2 days/week via a memorandum of understanding. The Coventry program was the only program that did not use school fields and did not compete against school sport. They used a local park for practices.

Game fields were more varied in their ability to create a competitive advantage or parity. Not all programs required this particular resource. In Chicago, the team did not participate in sanctioned competition, thus removing the need for game facilities. In Kenilworth and Coventry, the teams participated in outside tournaments. The reliance on tournament play and tournament facilities in many ways leveled the playing field, as their direct competitors also relied on tournament facilities. Thus, the potential advantage is found in the capacity to travel to tournaments with the most desirable facilities, rather than in one's own facility. The value of this resource is more equivocal than that, however. The programs with their own facilities can potentially host tournaments, thus reducing travel costs, as well as using the facilities and tournament hosting as a revenue stream. Further, a lack of game facilities can hinder the capacity to compete with club teams whose competitive structure is based on league play rather than tournament play.

Consequently, in New Orleans, Austin, and Harrisburg, all league-based organizations, game facilities were not only essential, but were a way to distinguish their sport offering from competitors. All three of these programs brought teams to a common stadium for league play. The use of the school or community stadium lent legitimacy to the competition and created a game environment that was equivalent to that of other school sports with which these programs competed. In the case of Austin and New Orleans, they enhanced the game experience with elements such as announcers, bands, and cheerleaders. In fact, they created an atmosphere for the games that provided a competitive advantage over some girls' varsity teams by providing an experience similar to (albeit not equivalent to) boys football. This was particularly important in the Austin case, as football has significant cultural relevance. The game venue was undoubtedly the most valuable physical resource for the Austin program, as it provided quality physical facilities and support facilities, as well as a sense of legitimacy. The league played a spring schedule on Friday nights and scheduled three games at the same venue, back-to-back. They used full-sized, high school fields, on artificial turf with lights, modestly paid officials, an announcer, and music (Field Notes from Game Observation). As a player from Team 2 described, "There's the feel and rush of Friday nights in the fall, and now it's our turn. Just the feel of the stadium lights and fans there to support us makes it great." Few other sport programs for high school girls in Texas can compete with the "Friday Night Lights" experience provided by the Austin league.

All three of these programs gained a competitive advantage by hosting games at a common venue and on a common night. Because league teams were present for other games, the players and teams came to know and support one another, creating a sense of community. As one player from Austin said, "It's cool because

there's kind of basketball girls hang out with basketball girls, and soccer girls hang out with soccer girls, but for flag football all the girls from all the different sports come play together." School competitions were played in quality venues, but their games were based in an adversarial format. Consequently, any sense of community was limited to within a team's fans, rather than among teams and players across the league. Although this benefit was unintended, it was highly valued and difficult for school sport programs to replicate.

Transportation: The only program with transportation was New Orleans (also the only school-sponsored league). Although it was not an official varsity sport, it competed with programs in the varsity sports system for resources and participants. Transportation to games in this competitive environment is expected (and necessary) and confers no competitive advantage. This is also true for the other programs competing mainly against varsity school sport programs. Yet, none of those programs (Austin, Harrisburg, and Kenilworth) had obtained any transportation resources. Instead, each minimized the need for such resources: Austin and Harrisburg used school fields for practice and play, Kenilworth practiced at the girls' school, and teams traveled to tournaments (parents provided). Dependence on parents for transportation did not provide a competitive advantage, nor did it result in a competitive disadvantage.

Uniforms and equipment: Both uniforms and equipment required for flag football are minimal. All teams had the requisite equipment: flag belts and footballs. There is no significant variability in the quality of the equipment, and the quantity of the equipment is not a big factor in program quality. Equipment, therefore, has little capacity to provide a competitive advantage over other flag football programs. However, it could (and perhaps does) provide a cost advantage for programs competing against more equipment-intensive sports. The Austin and Harrisburg programs leveraged this advantage further by obtaining their equipment from NFL Flag.

The uniforms were also minimal, mainly consisting of matching jerseys. Some of the U.S. programs created custom jerseys, and others used stock jerseys; the Chicago program did not use uniforms at all. Both U.K. programs used custom-designed jerseys. Uniforms are considered a necessary component of team sports; thus, this resource had little potential to create any competitive advantage. However, the absence or poor quality of uniforms can result in a competitive disadvantage. Two distinctions emerge from our data. First, the only program without uniforms competed for participants not against sport teams, but against other after-school student clubs. Thus, uniforms were uncommon. Second, the symbolic nature of uniforms can infer high value to this resource. For example, the Austin program provided custom jerseys in school colors, with school names prominently displayed. This was a critical resource, linking the program to the schools. In so doing, it was able to minimize an advantage of its school-based competitors by providing the participants with the ability to represent their school. As one athlete said, "In the fall the boys get to play, and now it's our turn to represent." Consequently, the Austin program achieved competitive parity with its uniforms and a small but important competitive advantage over club sport competitors that did not identify with the schools.

The programs that were able to leverage their physical resources did so via the symbolic, rather than tangible, value of the resource: the "Friday Night Lights" context of playing on the school field in Austin with all of the trappings of "real football, just like the guys" or the creation of identity that is associated with team jerseys, which allows the players to link their own

identity to a valued identity (e.g., a historically successful team, the school, an NFL team). The symbolic value of the physical resources was never an overt choice by program champions. However, it is instructive to note that programs were able to increase the attractiveness of their own programs by co-opting the intangible resources of competitors.

Organizational resources. Although there is sometimes confusion in the categorization of organizational processes as either intangible assets or capabilities (cf. Galbreath, 2005), there is general agreement that an organization's processes are more critical to competitive success than more tangible resources such as those discussed above. The programs examined in this study worked to establish themselves in a crowded and mature competitive environment. The critical organizational resources, the ones that have provided a true competitive advantage, are the delivery processes—that is, the elements that deliver the sport to the participants. The key elements forming the sport delivery system in this study consisted of the season time and length, game times, competitive level, affiliation, and governance structures. The most consistent finding across all programs was that the delivery systems were different from those of their competitors—traditional, existing sport organizations. This was true across all programs and competitive environments. Our data suggest that the differences were in response to a lack of resources compared with their competitors, combined with a need to carve out a niche in the competitive environment.

Season and game length/time: Creative scheduling in terms of the timing and length of the playing season served as an important source of competitive leverage for many of these nascent programs. No one strategy was universally utilized, but each program examined their competitive space and found a way to exploit a niche. In the United Kingdom, the programs played essentially year-long, mirroring the other flag football programs across the region, which gave them competitive parity amongst other club programs. In Austin and Harrisburg, the leagues played in the spring, opposite boys football, which gave them access to practice and playing fields, and the opportunity to mimic the social prominence of boys high school football. New Orleans also leveraged the popularity of boys football by playing in the same season on the varsity fields, but on Monday rather than Friday night. In addition, they leveraged the game times to fit transportation needs by creatively utilizing the fields (playing four games crosswise at the same time). The athletic director said that positioning the sport in the fall helped to recruit girls to the league and had the added benefit of building community in the schools at the start of the year.

Competitive level: Programs varied in the competitive level at which their program was delivered. In Chicago, due to a limited scope, there were no official games. Competition was limited to intersquad scrimmages at their home practice field, and the level was perceived to be quite low and as a more fun, skill-building activity. One of the players noted, "It's less competitive, but you can still make it competitive. You can get loose, and still have fun, and still play right." The coach's enthusiasm attracted girls, and she worked with them to build their individual skills. The low commitment required seemed to be attractive to most participants and was consistent with the commitment required to participate in other after-school clubs.

The approach to delivering a competitive activity was, for most programs, a critical way to differentiate itself from its competitors. According to interviews with the participants and parents, the programs' approach to competition was one of their biggest strengths. The programs were structured to facilitate a high

level of competition between teams, while minimizing intrateam competition. The teams did not eliminate players, and every player garnered significant and meaningful playing time (Interviews with Players, League Directors). Importantly, they contrasted this with the fierce competition to make the varsity sports teams. One player on Austin Team 2 described, “It’s not like school sports where girls said, ‘I’m really good at this sport, so I’m going to take my spot.’ It’s actually like we teach each other and help each other out, so it makes it even more fun.” In this way, the programs differ from traditional school sports, where within-team competition is fierce and participation opportunities are limited.

In Kenilworth, the core strength of the competitive structure was the breadth of opportunities, both competitive and noncompetitive. The sport was delivered in an exciting, stimulating way, with an ethos of “Fun, Friends, and Family” (Interview with Program Director). As several girls stated, “We’re building our own Friday Night Lights culture!” The athletes were guaranteed a spot and meaningful game opportunities if they attended practice. Regular monthly pizza nights were highly popular social events that created a sense of community. Those with no desire to play competitively were welcomed on local teams; skilled athletes with competitive desire were accelerated into the national team program (Interview with Program Director). In Coventry, the teams played monthly in BAFA tournaments. They won consistently in the highly competitive British national mixed league and have won national championships in the lauded Opal Series of British Flag Football (Interview with Program Partner). This high competition level, with a low formal structure and low entry cost, made the team attractive for girls who were interested in the sport and had the capacity to travel to tournaments.

In-season commitment: Competitive sport typically requires an intense commitment from the athlete and their parents. In this study, none of the programs required athletes to commit to training more than twice per week and competition once per week. In most cases, this was due to limited resources. Fields were scarce, and coaches were few and unpaid; in short, they could not afford to provide more. As their competitors required a significantly higher commitment, there was concern that the emerging programs would be considered inferior or lack legitimacy in the eyes of the participants and potential participants. However, the reduced commitment was highly valued by the participants, who saw it as a critical and desirable point of differentiation.

Synthesis of delivery components: Each of the programs, intentionally or otherwise, differentiated itself from its competitors by the manner in which it delivered the sport experience. Access to and mobilization of resources created, for most programs, a need to think creatively about its delivery processes. For some (e.g., Austin and Harrisburg), that meant moving the competitive season. This opened up the use of high-quality school fields for competition and reduced the competition for practice fields with school sports.

By far the most valued element differentiating the delivery systems from the existing sport offerings was the inclusivity of these programs. No players were eliminated. When needed, new teams were formed and opportunities at varying competitive levels were provided. In fact, the differentiation obtained by altering traditional sport delivery systems was the key factor attracting participants. Consequently, these programs reached a new and different market segment than is being served by school and club sports. For example, the Austin league attracted “athletic girls who were interested, but not playing varsity sport” (Interview with Program Director). A parent of a Kenilworth player said about their daughter’s participation that “We NEVER thought this would

happen. She has always literally hated sport and dropped out of all of them. Now the Panthers are all she talks about.” By attracting new market segments, these programs are enlarging the overall market for sport in their environment.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to consider the resource packages needed to effectively enter and position a participation-based sport organization in a competitive marketplace and to identify the ways in which resources are mobilized for competitive advantage across distinctive competitive environments. Although each geographic location brought its own unique challenges to the competitive environment, all six programs competed mainly with school sports, club sports, or some combination thereof. In all cases, the emergent organizations had fewer resources than their competitors. When they managed to obtain resources of a particular type, they had less of that resource than did their competitors and usually lesser quality. Success was contingent less on creating a competitive advantage and more on attaining competitive parity. That meant obtaining and mobilizing enough resources to be seen as a legitimate player on the local sports scene. Interestingly, most organizations obtained some competitive advantage based on the processes and delivery systems created *because of the resource challenges they faced*. These organizations not only obtained cost leadership, but they differentiated their programs from both club and school programs by considering creative ways to deliver the sport experience—all this while expanding the overall pool of girls playing organized sport.

A key challenge implicit in any discussion of resources is that of sustainability. In fact, the RBV is, at its core, a theory of the capacity of an organization’s resources to produce a sustained competitive advantage (Barney, 1991). And yet, for emerging organizations entering a crowded competitive environment like those in this study, the more immediate concern is survival. In every case, program champions worked ceaselessly to obtain the resources necessary to keep their programs running. They worked to obtain the requisite resources to achieve parity with their competitors. This is consistent with work in management (Chakrabarti, 1974), program design (Molloy, 2018), and policy making (Mintrom, 2020), which finds that champions’ skills locating, using, and managing resources are pivotal to successful product (Howell & Sheab, 2001), service (Rosenberg, Fowler, & Brownson, 2019), and policy (Gordon, 2011) development. Largely due to the program champions’ efforts to overcome contexts and contingencies, they were able to formulate and implement strategies to stay competitive (cf. Mintrom & Norman, 2009).

The program champions recognized their own role in keeping their programs running and worried over succession planning. Rarely, however, did they have the capacity to create the very structures that could ensure leadership succession. Even when they were able to generate a board of directors, their own knowledge of internal processes, relationship networks, and organizational knowledge was difficult to share. And yet, intangible resources such as these have been shown to have the most impact in sustaining a competitive advantage (Villalonga, 2004). This resonates clearly with the current study, as the sole consistent source of competitive advantage was a function of creativity in the delivery process. Ironically, creativity in the delivery process was needed *because* tangible resources were lacking. And yet, every program sought to increase and enhance their resources.

This conundrum highlights a critical challenge for these programs. How do they sustain the competitive advantage they have accrued when they did not create it intentionally? Instead, it occurred in response to resource needs, as program modifications and choices were made in the presence of resource restrictions. Clearly, the program champions sought to create programs much like those of their competitors—school and/or club sport programs—but were not yet able to obtain the resources needed to do so. Instead, they created programs that attracted a new market that valued inclusiveness, league-wide competition, within-team cooperation and support, a sense of community, and a comparatively smaller commitment of participants. Previous research (Chalip & Green, 1998) illustrates the difficulty in maintaining a sport program that does not conform to established norms. More available resources would enable programs to become more like the traditional, resource-rich programs with which they compete. As Chalip and Green (1998) noted, “By becoming more like traditional programs, a modified program would be able to attract and retain participants who are more comfortable with the trappings of traditional youth sport” (p. 330). In other words, additional resources could unintentionally destroy the very competitive advantage these programs currently enjoy. Program champions, their board members, and coaches must be explicit in creating and maintaining strategies to sustain and enhance program elements that differentiate their programs from traditional programs and should use any further resources to do so. As Connelly, Ketchen, and Slater (2011) noted, “The basis for sustainable competitive advantage resides in its resources and in how the firm structures, bundles, and leverages those resources” (p. 88). More resources should not cause a strategic shift back to traditional sport models. These programs were independently created and thus have no pressure to conform from governing bodies seeking to achieve larger goals for sport development. However, their very independence may limit their athletes’ potential to advance in their sport.

Building Theory: Informing Top-Down and Bottom-Up Sport Development Approaches

In addition to an examination of this phenomenon from an RBV, the findings also provide implications for the better understanding and advancement of both theoretical perspectives on sport development systems: top-down and bottom-up. In the top-down sport development approach, NSO recognition gives legitimacy to a sport organization and also defines the pathways and resources needed toward sport growth and specific sport outcomes (DeBoscher, De Knop, Van Bottenburg, & Shibli, 2006). This can be attractive for sports that have sufficient resources to implement the NSO model because organizations can simply follow a predetermined model for structures, resources, and outcomes. In the current study, all organizations adopted some of the policies, rules, and/or training practices from the governing bodies of flag football (e.g., NFL Flag, or BAFA) to inform their organizational practices, but were also informed by and adopted policies locally that helped them reach their local target markets.

Second, the standardized approach inherent in most top-down models also plays out in the participant base these programs attract. Traditional sport organizations such as NSOs appeal to a particular target market. In fact, their ability to retain athletes and develop elite performers depends on the consistency of the benefits and socialization they provide (cf. Green, 2005). Participants that do not value these benefits or the program elements that provide those benefits are lost to the system. By contrast, a bottom-up model of

sport development is one whereby sport starts in singular organizations and may or may not grow to larger, replicable models. This approach appears to be effective for meeting situational needs, but falls short in delivering sustainable or consistent outcomes and makes it difficult for athletes to identify a pathway to continued development (Sparvero, Chalip, & Green, 2008). For these reasons, bottom-up approaches are often dismissed as either too difficult to build (without guidance or direction) or as lacking legitimacy (because they are not part of larger sport systems). In fact, perceptions of legitimacy have been considered critical to organizations’ capacity to attract and retain participants (Hayhurst & Frisby, 2010), as well as their capacity to build relationships (Sam, 2011) and ultimately compete for resources. However, each of the programs in this study developed bottom-up and is serving a group of girls who claim that they love the sport *because* it is not like others and that they would not be participating in sport if not for this program. Each uses its available resources in distinct ways to create a bundle of benefits attractive to its specific target market. This type of sport fills a legitimate need and is shaped by the unique combination of its structures, resources, and environment.

It is unlikely that any of these programs would exist in the same way in a different context. And yet, each operates independent of a broader sport development system. In these programs, the athletes “come from nowhere” and “go nowhere.” The U.K.-based programs are more integrated into a broader sport development system than are the U.S. programs. This is also consistent with the national context. Most British sport operates via top-down development models, with clear pathways for continued participation and advancement. Women’s flag football has not yet reached the stage whereby it has attracted top-down attention. And yet, the ubiquity of club-based systems in this context provides players from the U.K. clubs with a clear pathway to continue participation beyond high school. In fact, these players already participate in competitions outside of high school and play in a university league. Both models of sport development (top-down and bottom-up) serve a legitimate purpose within their respective spaces. Our findings support the importance of elements from both systems. In fact, the findings of this study make a strong case for flexibility and creativity in creating programs to attract nonparticipants and enlarge the overall pool of sport participants at an age ripe with dropout.

In both models, sport organizations must address a core set of strategic issues that will help them attract, transition, develop, and retain athletes (Brouwers et al., 2015; Green, 2005; Shilbury et al., 2008; Sotiriadou et al., 2008). Identifying and obtaining the relevant resources and structures and mobilizing them in ways that differentiate programs from one another can create new and distinct sport participation opportunities and broaden the opportunities available in ways that maintain existing participation and build new (and returning) participation. The use of the RBV fills an important theoretical gap by showing that *how* organizations obtain and mobilize their resources to fit with their environment impacts what the sport offering eventually looks like and who will be attracted to and served by these organizations.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study examined six cases of new sport organizations that were effective in attracting and/or reengaging girls in sport. All six were able to obtain resources in all resource categories. The number of resources, amount of each resource, and quality of each resource varied. In all cases, the bundle of resources obtained was adequate

to obtain at least minimal competitive parity. The source of competitive advantage for these new programs (i.e., their delivery processes) was, surprisingly, rooted in the needs created by minimal resources. Future work should explore the tension to maintain the competitive advantage engendered by the distinctive delivery processes while also obtaining and mobilizing increasing resources.

This study contributed to our understanding of sport development by utilizing RBV to examine both top-down and bottom-up models of sport development. While it covers a wide array of contexts and two countries, in the global sense, it is still somewhat limited. And yet, it provides evidence supporting the need to match resource packages with the environment to support successful differentiation strategies. Future work should further examine the resources necessary to compete in a crowded, but defined, marketplace, that is, study the resources needed to compete *within* a clearly defined environment. Then, researchers can identify the range of strategies used to mobilize those resources for competitive advantage.

Future work should also extend the range of environments in which sport programs compete, as well as the range of markets they seek to attract (e.g., boys, recreational, elite). Iterative analyses using the RBV can provide sport administrators with more effective strategic direction without resorting to a single best practice orientation. Rather, by understanding the commonalities and differences in resource bundles, their mobilization, and environmental factors (i.e., context), program administrators can create more effective and nuanced strategies for competitive advantage. Ultimately, the creation of more differentiated programs within a community will create attractive sport opportunities for a wider array of participants.

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Appendix: Overview of Strategic Six Flag Football Contexts

Program type	School/ club-hybrid	School based	Intramural+	School-based club	School/club hybrid— mixed ages	Private club—mixed ages and mixed gender
Example program	Austin, TX	New Orleans, LA	Harrisburg, PA	Chicago, IL	Kenilworth Panthers, United Kingdom	Coventry Cougars, United Kingdom
Overall observed outcomes	Increase competitive sport opportunities outside of school structure.	Create low-investment participation opportunities to provide after-school involvement and create trial opportunities for other school sports.	Increase competitive sport opportunities outside of school structure.	Create low-investment participation opportunities to provide exposure to sport.	Sport trial opportunities. Increase competitive sport opportunities outside of school structure. Compete nationally (oldest group).	Compete nationally at tournaments. Develop players for the British national team.
Human resources						
Number of teams in league	Seven teams from five schools	Eight teams from six schools	10 teams from two schools	One team from one school	Three teams from one school	Two teams, nonschool based
Number of girls in the program	70	120	92	12–15	50	Nine girls and 11 boys
Number of coaches	7	6–10	20	1	6	4
Player recruitment strategy	In schools through flyers, announcements, and lunchroom meetings. Word of mouth once 1–2 years into program.	In schools through announcements and personal contacts with coaches.	Coordinator gives big PPT presentation during lunch period in school and all girls are invited. Students invited in class and through word of mouth.	Introduced in PE class and offered as after-school activity, plus personal contact with coaches.	Trial opportunities (“taster sessions”) provided at local schools during PE classes. Free first practice incentivized.	Personal invitations from coaches or program champion and word of mouth. Training sessions on Sundays as showcase.
Coaches recruitment strategy	Coaches are sourced from a local youth flag football organization.	Coaches are sourced from high schools (coaches or teachers).	Coaches are sourced from high school (boys football players, former girls flag participant, and two parents).	One coach is flag football participant. Lack of additional coaches is limiting factor in league growth.	Coaches are recruited from local universities by the program champion.	No coaches are recruited. Coaches are the program champions (two daughters).
Coach training	Already trained.	No training.	Program champion provides initial brief training in rules and practice design.	No training.	Initial training provided by program champion. Additional training through BAFA and certification opportunities.	No training.
Program champion	Mom of daughters in program with no school or USAF ties for program start.	School district AD with no personal ties and no USAF ties for program start.	Dad of daughters in program, who was coach of summer girls flag team and teacher in school.	Teacher in school who was current adult flag participant with USAF ties.	Community member and American football enthusiast.	Community family who were American football enthusiasts and former flag participants.

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Program type	School/ club-hybrid	School based	Intramural+	School-based club	School/club hybrid— mixed ages	Private club—mixed ages and mixed gender
Example program	Austin, TX	New Orleans, LA	Harrisburg, PA	Chicago, IL	Kenilworth Panthers, United Kingdom	Coventry Cougars, United Kingdom
Administration	Administered by program champion and coaching director who acts as league commissioner.	Administered by school district AD.	Administered by program champion.	Administered by program champion.	Administered by program champion.	Administered by founding family.
Additional team support	Team moms' function to provide information and organizational structure. Schools embrace affiliation.	Coaches facilitate communication and organizational structures. School district administrators provide use of fields, transportation, and moral support.	School administrators allow use of fields and provide moral support.	None. Major limiting factor currently and in the future.	PE teachers provide facilities and trial opportunities. Parents provide transport and food.	Parents of participants.
Physical resources						
Practice facilities	"Back fields" at high schools. Lowest priority for fields and compete with varsity sports for field use (soccer and football).	Open areas or fields at high schools. Lowest priority for fields, compete with boys football. Some schools have no practice space.	Fields at high school. Ample space available around high school. Neighboring schools come to main school to practice and play.	Open grass area in back of high school. Not marked, but free of obstructions.	Turf soccer fields at school during the week. Friday nights at local park.	Municipal park. Not marked, but free of obstructions.
Game facilities	JV stadium, turf fields with lights, music, and announcer. Modestly paid officials. Facility cost is limiting factor in league growth.	Community stadium, turf field, bands, cheerleaders, and no announcer. Modestly paid officials.	School varsity stadium, no music, and no announcer. Volunteer officials (male football players).	Open grass area in back of high school. Not marked, but free of obstructions.	Tournaments throughout the United Kingdom and Europe. Typically played on formal, high-quality fields.	Tournaments throughout the United Kingdom and Europe. Typically played on formal, high-quality fields.
Uniforms and equipment	League purchased custom jerseys with school names and colors. Purchase own shorts and shoes. NFL Flag provides flags and some footballs.	Mix of team-based and generic NFL Flag jerseys. Some have sponsors.	League purchased NFL-style jerseys. Some are sponsored. Girls keep them. NFL Flag provides flags and footballs.	No uniforms. School provided flags, cones, and a few footballs.	Custom-designed uniforms, flags, and balls provided by government grant.	Simple custom uniforms. Flags and balls provided by program champion.
Transportation	Self-provided. Parents provide or participants walk to or from. Not a limiting factor.	Busses or self-provided. Major limiting factor for number of participants, time or place of games, and practice.	Parents provide or participants walk to or from.	None. Somewhat a limiting factor due to geographical range of participants. Limiting factor for interschool competition.	Self-provided. Parents provide transport for practices and tournaments.	Self-provided. Parents provide transport for practices and tournaments.

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Program type	School/ club-hybrid	School based	Intramural+	School-based club	School/club hybrid— mixed ages	Private club—mixed ages and mixed gender
Example program	Austin, TX	New Orleans, LA	Harrisburg, PA	Chicago, IL	Kenilworth Panthers, United Kingdom	Coventry Cougars, United Kingdom
Competitive structure and resources						
Practice times	One to two times/week at discretion of coach.	One to three times/ week at discretion of coach and transportation.	One time/week as coordinated by teams.	One to three times/month at discretion of coach.	One time/week for 2 hr.	One time/week for 2 hr.
Season length/time	12 weeks, spring	8 weeks, fall	8–10 weeks, spring	Fall, spring as weather permitted	46 weeks	Year long
Game times	Friday nights. One game at a time. One game/ week.	Monday after school. Four games at a time. One to two games/week.	Tuesday or Thursday after school. One game at a time. One game/ week.	No official games. Inter- squad scrim- mages.	Monthly week- end tournaments throughout the United Kingdom and Europe.	Weekend tournaments throughout the United Kingdom and Europe.
Competitive level	Medium to high Described as high interteam and low intrateam.	Medium to high Described as high interteam and low intrateam.	Medium to high Described as high interteam and low intrateam.	Low Little competi- tion. Seen as fun and skill build- ing. Do not keep score or play “real” games.	Mixed Matched to desired level of athletes. “Fun,” though nation- ally competitive.	Mixed Midlevel for 12U and high level for 17U.
Affiliation and govern- ance structure	NFL Flag Rules (8 v 8)	NFL Flag Rules (5 v 5)	NFL Flag Rules (5 v 5)	No governance	IFAF Rules (5 v 5)	IFAF Rules (5 v 5)
Financial structure and resources						
Player costs	\$60–\$90. Cov- ers fields, offi- cials, jerseys (reused), announcer, and insurance.	Participants do not pay. Schools pay \$200 each to help cover officials and transportation. New Orleans Saints help pay for offi- cials. District pays \$50 hour for city fields.	\$25 per player. Covers insurance and jerseys.	No cost.	Almost no player costs. CSP fund- ing pays for equipment, uniforms, and coaches.	2 GBP and costs of uniforms.
Funding sources	NFL Flag sup- port coaches and officials. Local schools provide discounted facil- ity costs for practices and games. NFL Flag provided flags and footballs.	Strategic partners paid for facility, busses, shirts, flags, and equipment in addition to media and PR coverage and publicity. Sponsors for uni- forms or NFL Flag provided jerseys. NFL Flag provided flags and footballs.	NFL Flag provided flags and footballs.	Self-funded by the program champion.	CSP	Fund raising, player contri- butions, and in-house sponsoring.

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Program type	School/ club-hybrid	School based	Intramural+	School-based club	School/club hybrid— mixed ages	Private club—mixed ages and mixed gender
Example program	Austin, TX	New Orleans, LA	Harrisburg, PA	Chicago, IL	Kenilworth Panthers, United Kingdom	Coventry Cougars, United Kingdom
Relational resources						
Key partners and relationships	School district (player recruit- ment, practice, and playing fields), NFL Flag youth pro- gram (coach and officials recruit- ment), and parents.	Individual schools’ administration (player and coach recruitment, trans- portation, and par- ticipation fees). New Orleans Sport Commission (PR, supplemental income). Commu- nity sponsor (uni- forms and cash).	School administra- tion (player recruit- ment and facilities). School teachers (verbal support). Male football players (coaches).	School adminis- tration (verbal support but no logistical sup- port). Lack of partnerships probably key to lack of growth.	CSP, Kenil- worth school, parents, and local university (sourcing coaches).	Personal network of program champions. Parents.

Note. NFL = National Football League; CSP = County Sports Partnership; IFAF = International Federation of American Football; PE = physical education; AD = Athletic Director; USAF = USA Football; BAFA = British American Football Association; GBP = British Pound Sterling; PR = Public Relations.