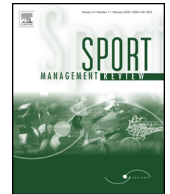




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The making of a social entrepreneur: From participant to cause champion within a sport-for-development context

Adam Cohen^{a,*}, Jon Welty Peachey^{b,1}^a Texas Tech University, Department of Health, Exercise and Sport Science, Box 43011, Lubbock, TX 79409, USA^b University of Illinois, 104 Huff Hall, MC-584, 1206 South Fourth Street, Champaign, IL 61820, USA

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of a sport-for-development initiative, Street Soccer USA, on one of its most successful participants in order to understand her experiences, expectations, and motivations towards becoming a cause champion and social entrepreneur and continuing her activism. We adopted a narrative inquiry approach for this study in an effort to explore this topic in a detailed manner. Guided by previous literature within the field of social entrepreneurship, we found there were three specific background influences – sport, life, and traumatic experiences – which influenced her social entrepreneurial leanings. Within that context we show how the variables of people, opportunity, and capital intersect and lead towards the social value proposition of the social entrepreneur. Drawn from the findings, we provide theoretical and practical implications and directions for future research in the field of sport-for-development and social entrepreneurship.

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1. Introduction

“You’re trying to solve the problem with something you love. I needed to change. I was going to end up in jail or I was going to die.” – Lisa Wrightsman (*New York Times*, 2010, p. D2).

Although sport-for-development (SFD) research has increased in popularity within the field of sport management in recent years, recommendations have been made for unique approaches and longitudinal investigations in an effort to further illuminate the long-term impact of these initiatives on participants (Coalter, 2010; Kidd, 2007). Beyond attempting to identify the impact these organizations and programs may have across the globe, there is a need to identify and investigate the traits and characteristics of the cause champions (e.g., social entrepreneurs) involved within these endeavors. Identifying and developing these individuals could be critical to the long-term viability of SFD initiatives’ sustainability and growth. While the term ‘champion’ is often recognized in sport as a player or team who wins a title or an award, it is also defined as “a person who fights or argues for a cause or on behalf of someone else” (Oxford Dictionary, n.d.). As Maguire (2009) notes; “athletes are not simply champions of their sport, but also of their local community and nation and sometimes, humanity as a whole” (p. 260).

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 806 834 0914.

E-mail addresses: adam.cohen@ttu.edu, adamcohen111@gmail.com (A. Cohen), jwpeach@illinois.edu (J.W. Peachey).

¹ Tel.: +1 217 244 2956.

Considering the SFD field is in its infancy, there has been a call for scholars to engage in research to advance theory and contribute to an understanding of the potential for these initiatives to contribute to social change and policy development at the local, regional, and national levels (Coalter, 2010; Darnell, 2010). One can broadly define SFD as the use of sport to exert a positive influence on public health, the socialization of children, youth and adults, the social inclusion of the disadvantaged, the economic development of regions and states, and on fostering intercultural exchange and conflict resolution (Lyras & Welty Peachey, 2011). One SFD line of research which has been gaining awareness among scholars and practitioners is the recognition of social inclusion in society through sport, especially in the case of at-risk populations like the homeless (Magee, 2011; Sherry, 2010). Social inclusion has been considered a necessary and important step towards improving the lives of disadvantaged people (Jarvie, 2003). Coalter (2010, 2012) specifically classifies these inclusive programs that utilize sport for greater good on a continuum of *sport-plus* (sport is adapted and augmented with corresponding programming to help organizations achieve objectives) and *plus-sport* (organizations using sport as a hook to attract and reward people).

During a long-term monitoring and evaluation collaboration with Street Soccer USA (SSUSA), a non-profit organization using soccer (in both a *sport-plus* and *plus-sport* framework) as a means to help the homeless “score goals on the field, and achieve their goals in life” (SSUSA, n.d.), one particular storyline emerged meriting further attention. Amongst a group of males on a SSUSA team from a Sacramento recovery center, each of whom showcased a unique hairstyle in the form of a Mohawk (the team was named the Mohawks, signifying the importance of the haircuts serving as a signature bonding experience for each participant), was a lone female sporting a similar hairstyle. Lisa Wrightsman, a 32-year-old, white, Sacramento native and a formerly homeless woman, went from star college athlete, to recovering addict (from alcohol and illicit drug use), to community activist. Lisa’s journey was facilitated by her involvement in SSUSA. As noted by an article in *The New York Times*, Lisa was a standout, both in appearance and performance, at the 2010 SSUSA Cup, a tournament held in Washington, D.C. for 20 SSUSA teams from around the U.S.:

Their collective rows of trimmed hair atop bald scalps helped form a sense of team commonality against the strong individualists on display during the tournament here. One player from the six-member Mohawks made herself even more distinguishable by virtue of her gender and her level of play (NYT, 2010, D2).

At that time, Lisa was one of only a few women in the SSUSA network of teams playing on a men’s team; there were no official mixed or female teams. Thus, Lisa’s storyline is all the more unusual and more likely to draw attention in comparison to the majority of male SSUSA participants. Importantly, beyond simply becoming another success story for SSUSA, Lisa became a cause champion and began to show tendencies of social entrepreneurship as she continued to work within the SSUSA mission to give back to her own community. However, we did not know why the SSUSA experience resonated to such a great degree with Lisa, or how she became a cause champion and social entrepreneur. These are intriguing questions, as they have merit for SFD theory development on impacts and for SFD practice. The purpose of this study, therefore, was to examine the impact of SSUSA on one of its most successful participants, Lisa Wrightsman, in order to understand her experiences, expectations, and motivations towards becoming a cause champion and social entrepreneur and continuing her activism.

2. Research context

SSUSA, founded in 2005 by Lawrence Cann, forms collaborations with various social service programs in 20 U.S. cities that target a wide range of marginalized homeless individuals (i.e., orphaned youth, people in recovery, and people with mental health issues). These homeless individuals play on SSUSA soccer teams, which are coached by volunteers and case workers, and compete in local leagues. SSUSA has three goals that aim to affect positive life changes among participants: (a) Build community and trust through sports, transforming the context within which homeless individuals live from one of isolation, abuse, and marginalization, to one of community, purpose, and achievement; (b) Require participants to set three, six, and 12-month life goals; and (c) Empower individuals by marrying clinical services to sport programming and providing access to educational and employment opportunities (SSUSA, n.d.). The major capstone event that SSUSA administers is the annual SSUSA Cup held in Washington, D.C. or New York City. This tournament brings together teams of homeless individuals from the cities in which SSUSA operates to show support and unity. Additionally, at the conclusion of this event, male and female players are selected to represent the U.S. at the annual Homeless World Cup.

It was at the 2010 SSUSA Cup where Lisa’s story first emerged. A few years earlier she had been a recipient of a soccer scholarship and eventually became the second career scoring leader for Sacramento State University in California. She went on to play semi-professionally with the goal of reaching the professional level. However, by the age of 22, in her own words she: “Became accustomed to heavy drinking and partying and then after I was done with soccer I started to use pain killers and became addicted, which led to heavier drinking, methadone and by 28 I was addicted to meth.” These addictions eventually drove her to join a rehabilitation institution, Mather Community, in Sacramento, an organization which had a recently formed SSUSA affiliate team and Lisa was implored to join. Adhering to the three-, six- and 12-month life goals, along with a strong support system, Lisa was able to achieve key goals such as staying clean and sober and moving off the center into her own home. She also gained full-time employment working at a vocational college as a student services administrator, a position that allowed her the opportunity to assist other individuals within the community with achieving employment goals. Specifically in regards to soccer, she participated with the team as a player for one year before moving into a coaching capacity and forming a women’s team (see the findings below). Guided by the philosophy and mission of

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