The Future Past of the Amateur Sports Act: Developing American Sport

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Abstract
The United States is struggling to hold its own in international competitions. The Amateur Sports Act mandates that the USOC and its NGBs should build American sport performances by fostering sport participation throughout the country, and by enabling sport research. However, data from the past 16 years of sport participation demonstrate that participation is declining in many of our key sports, while others show inconsistent or merely ephemeral growth. Further, sport research is no longer pursued by the USOC, and it is not funded by any U.S. government agency or private American foundation. Consequently, the American sporting culture is eroding, and the United States is becoming a client nation when it comes to sport research. A review of the formation of The Amateur Sports Act shows that it was formulated to address Cold War concerns. Consequently, the Act failed to consider sport development, as the Act’s primary purpose was to engender a rationalized private sport system through which to build teams that could beat communist athletes. A reassessment of The Amateur Sports Act in light of contemporary conditions, suggests that greater attention to participation and research are necessary, but that such attention will require establishment of a foundation to nurture sport participation and to fund sport research. The foundation’s mandate would include creation of clubs and leagues to enable year round and lifelong sport participation, enhancement of the availability of sport facilities for club and league use, guidance for grassroots development of sport, and establishment of clear pathways for athletes. The template for such a foundation was created in the 1960s but never implemented. The time is ripe for it to be implemented now either by incorporating its mandates into the new Foundation for Fitness, Sport, and Nutrition, or by establishing a foundation that specifically targets sport development.

Keywords: sport development, Amateur Sports Act, sport participation, sport research
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Coaching takes place in a system of sport. Our sport system determines the contingencies on clubs, teams, athletes, trainers, and coaches. Consequently, what coaches can (and cannot) achieve is enabled or constrained by the nature of the sport system that is in place. In the United States, our sport system is undergirded by the Amateur Sports Act, which was passed in 1978, and amended slightly in the late 1990s. This paper considers the Amateur Sports Act with reference to matters of sport development – matters that determine what is enabled and constrained in our sport system. This paper begins by noting where we are now with reference to sport development, it then reviews how we got here (with particular reference to The Amateur Sports Act), and it then considers where we might choose to go.

Where We Are Now

It is easy to celebrate our sporting successes, especially when we top the summer Olympic medals table, or when our women soccer players make it to the final of the FIFA World Cup. But a focus on medal counts or the success of any particular team does not provide insight into the overall health of the system. As it turns out, how well we think we are doing depends on how we look at it.

Consider, for example our international performance. The total number of gold medals earned by the American athletes (as a percentage of total gold medals possible) in each Summer Olympic Games from 1988 through 2008 is graphed in Figure 1. Notice that despite a nice bump upward in 1996, when we hosted the Games in Atlanta, our performance has generally declined – from just under 15% of possible golds in 1988 to less than 12% in 2008. In other words, measured in this way, we have not even been holding our own.
Figure 1. United States Summer Olympic gold medals as a percentage of total gold medals possible.

It looks somewhat better in the case of the Winter Olympic Games, although that is partly a consequence of how poor we were in 1988. Gold medals won by American athletes (as a percentage of total gold medals possible) is graphed in Figure 2. Although the overall trend is more positive than negative, we have been struggling to hold our own. Indeed, following a high when we hosted the Games in Salt Lake City, our performance has declined. Consider it this...
way: With a population approximately 10% of our own, and with a far smaller total spend, Canada won more gold medals than we did in Vancouver. In fact, they spent $20 million less to “own the podium,” as they titled it, than my university spent on its Athletics budget.

![United States Winter Olympic gold medals as a percentage of total gold medals possible.](image)

**Figure 2.** United States Winter Olympic gold medals as a percentage of total gold medals possible.
Economists, sociologists, and demographers often like to calculate performances with reference to each country’s Gross Domestic Product or its population. The logic is that a larger population base should increase a country’s opportunity to find outstanding athletes, and the more money in the economy, the more can be invested to provide the necessary training and services to foster elite sport performances. So, how do we look given those criteria?

The performance of the United States in comparison to other countries winning gold medals in Beijing and Vancouver is shown in Table 1. As examination of Table 1 shows, of 50 countries whose athletes won gold medals in Beijing, the United States ranks 31st in gold medals per capita – immediately behind Kazakhstan, Spain, and Azerbaijan, and just ahead of France and the Dominican Republic. Of the 19 countries whose athletes won gold medals in Vancouver, the United States ranks 14th in gold medals per capita – immediately behind Australia and France, and just ahead of Poland. In other words, we rank poorly (in the bottom half) if we evaluate performance with reference to gold medals per capita.

Table 1.

Olympic Gold Medals per Capita

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<td>29. Azerbaijan (tied)</td>
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<td>33. Dominican Republic</td>
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<td>50. Indonesia</td>
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The picture looks worse if one calculates with reference to GDP. The position of the United States is shown in Table 2. As inspection of the table shows, the United States ranked 40th in Beijing and only two from the bottom in Vancouver.

**Table 2.**
Olympic Gold Medals by GDP

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<td>40. United States</td>
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<td>41. France</td>
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<td>42. Canada (tied)</td>
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* GDP not available for Cuba, North Korea, Zimbabwe

Of course, one can legitimately quibble with these indicators, as they may disadvantage large and rich countries, such as the United States. Nevertheless, they are useful to consider here because the economists, sociologists, and demographers who consider statistics like these have a point; we are not doing as well in international competition as our economy and our population merit. When one considers these data along with the medals trends in Figures 1 and 2, it is clear that we can do better.

If that is a goal, then the question is where to start in the evaluation of our system. Since The Amateur Sports Act was intended to help us build a sport system to exceed any in the world, it is a useful place to begin. And since the USOC and its NGBs are the governing bodies through which the Act is intended to have its effect, it is particularly instructive to see what the
Act says about the responsibilities of the USOC and the NGBs with reference to sport development.

The Amateur Sports Act’s key sport development requirements for the USOC are listed in Table 3. Following five requirements having to do with management of American teams, particularly in international competition, the Act goes on to require that the USOC promote physical fitness and participation in sport. It requires the USOC to assist in the development of sport programs, including development of facilities. It requires the USOC to coordinate provision of technical information, and to foster and enable sport research. Finally, the Act requires that the USOC aid development of sport for women, disabled athletes, and minorities. Note that these requirements are not limited to elite competitors, but are directed to foster mass sport participation in a system that can cultivate excellence. The two keys are participation and research.
Table 3.

Sport Development Requirements of the Amateur Sports Act (for the USOC)

§220503. Purposes
The purposes of the corporation are –

(manage US teams, especially in international competition)

6. to promote and encourage physical fitness and public participation in amateur athletic activities;
7. to assist organizations and persons concerned with sports in the development of amateur athletic programs for amateur athletes;
8. manage disputes;
9. to foster the development of amateur athletic facilities for use by amateur athletes and assist in making existing amateur facilities available for use by amateur athletes;
10. to provide and coordinate technical information on physical training, equipment design, coaching, and performance analysis;
11. to encourage and support research, development, and dissemination of information in the areas of sports medicine and sports safety;
12. to encourage and provide assistance to amateur athletic activities for women;
13. to encourage and provide assistance to amateur athletic programs and competition for amateur athletes with disabilities…
14. to encourage and provide assistance to amateur athletes of racial and ethnic minorities…

The Act’s pointed focus on participation and research make good sense. It can be useful to have a strong base of participation from which to grow the sport and provide a foundation for elite success (1). A strong base of participation provides the broadest talent pool from which to draw, and it enables a competitive sporting culture that features strong social comparison processes from which excellence grows. Indeed, this was an expectation of the framers of The Amateur Sports Act.

A broad base of participation is also useful for meeting goals beyond medals in international competition, such as public health. This was also explicit throughout the policymaking process that led to passage of the Amateur Sports Act, which is why it is explicit in
the Act’s assignment of Purpose 7 to the USOC. It is also consistent with current national policies that emphasize physical activity as one of the core pillars of our national anti-obesity campaign.

Research is also a necessary requirement. Any competitive industry requires research and development (R&D). You stay competitive by having a competitive edge, and that comes from the research base on which you build the innovations that put you in front. It is particularly true in sport, as the industry itself is grounded in competition.

Given the necessity of participation and research, The Amateur Sport Act mandates both for NGBs, too. The Act’s requirements of NGBs are given in Table 4. Requirements for the NGBs begin with the duty to develop interest and participation in the sport that the NGB governs. Then, following four requirements having to do with rules and competitions, the Act amplifies this requirement by requiring NGBs to build participation for women and the disabled. It concludes by mandating that NGBs coordinate technical information, and that they encourage and support research. Again, these requirements make good sense for any sport system that seeks to be excellent, as participation builds the sporting culture and provides the strongest base of talent, while research can provide a competitive edge. So, with reference to The Amateur Sports Act, it is appropriate to ask how we are doing in terms of sport participation and sport research.
Table 4.

Sport Development Requirements of the Amateur Sports Act (for NGBs)

§220524 General duties of national governing bodies

For the sport that it governs, a national governing body shall—(management of rules and competitions)

1. develop interest and participation throughout the United States and be responsible to the persons and amateur sports organizations it represents;

6. provide equitable support and encouragement for participation by women where separate programs for male and female athletes are conducted on a national basis;
7. encourage and support amateur athletic sports programs for individuals with disabilities and the participation of individuals with disabilities in amateur athletic activity, including, where feasible, the expansion of opportunities for meaningful participation by individuals with disabilities in programs of athletic competition for able-bodied individuals;
8. provide and coordinate technical information on physical training, equipment design, coaching, and performance analysis; and
9. encourage and support research, development, and dissemination of information in the areas of sports medicine and sports safety.

We are not doing particularly well in either. The story is particularly bad when it comes to research. Consider, for example, that the USOC library is no longer staffed and there are no plans to reopen it. Further, the USOC and NGB sport science and sports medicine programs have been shut down. There are occasional exceptions. For example, USA Football (which is not a USOC member) is currently funding several research projects. But the current thrust by the USOC and its NGBs has been to be a partner to university researchers, rather than to initiate or fund research. The problem with that approach is that university researchers are required by their universities to seek outside funding to support their research. While it can be useful to have the USOC or an NGB as a partner, that is not sufficient if funding is unavailable.

Sport research is not funded by our national funding agencies, such as the National Science Foundation, the National Institutes of Health, or the Centers for Disease Control and
Prevention. There are no sport-specific funding divisions of these agencies, and no sport-targeted requests for proposals from them. Although physical activity is of some interest, particularly as it applies to prevention of obesity and chronic disease, athletes are not deemed to be at-risk for either, so research that is funded has to do with exercise programming for non-athletes. Further, there is no private foundation putting money into American sport science.

There is money for research into physical activity in support of health, but that does not encompass sport. As a result, university-based researchers in this country are being told by their administrations that they should abandon sport and target their research at health (2). As a result, the United States is increasingly finding itself in the status of a client nation when it comes to sport research. We are increasingly dependent on research that trickles down from countries like Canada, Australia, Norway, Germany, and the UK. From a sports R&D point of view, we have become a Third World nation.

The picture is equally disturbing when one looks at participation numbers. The sixteen year trend in participation in seven key sports is shown in Figure 3.
Figure 3. Participation in seven key sports*

* Participation numbers are in thousands.
* Source: Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association [SBRnet]
These data are taken from the Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association (SGMA). As measures of actual participation, these figures are useful because they are not limited to members of affiliated clubs; these include the number of people who participate recreationally, even if not competitively. These are the best indicators of whether we are meeting The Amateur Sports Act’s goal of increasing interest and participation in sport activities.
Figure 4. Participation in soccer*
Inspection of Figure 4 shows that all seven of these sports have shown substantial declines in participation over the past sixteen years, albeit with some occasional bumps upward. From 1994-2010, participation in swimming declined by almost 10 million – from 61.4 million persons to 51.9 million persons (despite a transient upward blip in 2008). Participation in cycling declined from 48 million in 1994 to fewer than 39 million in 2010 – a loss of over 9 million. During that same period, baseball went from 16.7 million to 12.5 million participants – a loss of 4 million participants. Softball went from 18 million to fewer than 11 million participants – losing over 7 million participants. Volleyball went from 20.5 million to 10.6 million – a loss of almost half the participant base. Alpine skiing went from 10.5 million to 7.4 million participants – losing a third of its participants. Cross country skiing went from almost 4 million to barely over 2 million participants – losing almost half its participant base. And as the Figure 4 shows, these have been the result of fairly steady decreases over the past sixteen years. It does not bode well.

Of course, some sports seem to be doing better. But are they? Consider soccer. Popular wisdom supposes that soccer has taken off in the United States, particularly with the growth of youth soccer and adult soccer leagues. Yet, in actual fact, the trends have been jagged, and what growth there has been has been ephemeral, as shown in Figure 5. From highs of 14.5 million in 2002, and 14 million in 2006, soccer participation has declined by half a million in recent years.
Figure 5. Participation in snowboarding*

To be sure, a few sports have grown, such as snowboarding, as illustrated in Figure 6. This is largely a consequence of their appeal to an “action sports” psychographic. What is interesting about the action sports (which also include such new sports as parkour, disc golf, and
kiteboarding) is that they are not typically organized, marketed, or coached like the more traditional sports (3), such as those whose participation trends are shown in Figures 4 and 5. The action sports tend to be player run and peer coached; they tend to emphasize personal development over wins; they tend to grow via social media and word of mouth. There are undoubtedly lessons for us to learn here for ways we might make broad and strengthen the appeal of traditional sports, but in the absence of research funding, it is unlikely that the necessary lessons can be teased out and tested in practice.

It would appear that our NGBs have lost touch with their grassroots. That conclusion is consistent with what club and league administrators have had to say in interviews conducted by University of Texas researchers. The president of a summer swimming league described it this way:

We dropped our affiliation with USA Swimming because we simply got nothing for our registration fee except insurance, which we could get cheaper through the AAU. Even though our swimmers go only during the summer, USA Swimming wanted us to affiliate at the same fee as year round swimmers. There was a proposal to reduce fees, but even the reduced rate would have been too high. Programs like ours are built on intense volunteer effort. There are lots of good intentions among our volunteers, but not much expertise about running swimming programs. And we didn’t get any help from USA Swimming. We don’t get anything but insurance from the AAU, either. Both organizations are more concerned with elites than with grassroots programs.

Running is one of the few traditional sport activities for which SGMA data show steady increases, and running enjoys development support through the USA Track & Field Foundation. Nevertheless, here is how the president of a track club that has produced Olympic gold medalists described his frustrations at trying to build the sport locally:

It seems to me that all the national organizations don’t seem to be affecting the track clubs much. You know, the really sad thing I see is that you have so many good athletes in high school, and they don’t have an opportunity to train anywhere. There’s no place really for them to train. There aren’t many programs for young runners. Local people have been trying to get some programs going, but they haven’t been successful at getting support financially.
These two quotes illustrate the frustrations felt at the grassroots of sport. There is a sense of abandonment among those who work at the coalface of sport development. The problems are exacerbated when the lack of access for people living in poverty, especially in urban ghettos, is considered. As one social worker described it:

The problem for these kids is often that the family has problems, or doesn’t know where to get information, or how to fill out the right forms, or that kind of thing. In order for a kid to be in a program, there has to be initiative from somebody, and these kids usually don’t have parents or anyone else who can provide initiative. So you’ve got to do outreach, and it’s outreach to extremely aversive kinds of areas – dangerous areas sometimes. Nobody wants to live in these areas, including YMCAs and other kinds of organizations that could offer programs. So there is nothing for these kids, especially in the summer. They are also poor, which limits their opportunities.

Four conclusions emerge from the presentation so far:

1. The United States is not competing (internationally) as well as we might like to pretend.
2. We have become a client nation when it comes to sport R&D.
3. We have not done well at building sport participation overall; our sporting culture is eroding.
4. Problems are particularly acute at local levels and among the most disadvantage members of our society.

How We Got Here

Conclusions reached in the previous section are not what one would hope to find given the expectation that The Amateur Sports Act would enable us to have the best sport system possible. The Act does not mandate any government oversight of the USOC or its NGBs, and it specifies no contingencies in the event that participation, research, and consequent competitive successes decline. Nor does it provide any funding mechanisms to foster participation or research. So, how did we end up with an Act that mandates participation and research, but that fails to ensure either (4)?

It began with the Kraus-Weber tests in 1954. Those tests compared the number of children in the United States and Europe who met minimum standards for muscular fitness.
Although only 8.7% of European children failed the test, 57.9% of American children failed. To policymakers and the media, this suggested that American youth were unfit. Given the widespread fear at the time that a war against communism was looming, Americans feared that being so unfit could cause us to lose that war. Shortly after the Kraus-Weber test results were published, President Eisenhower created by Executive Order the President’s Council on Youth Fitness. That organization became the President’s Council on Physical Fitness (under President Kennedy), the President’s Council on Physical Fitness and Sport (under President Johnson), and the President’s Council of Fitness, Sport, and Nutrition (under President Obama).

Since it was created by Executive Order, the Council does not exist in law, and it must borrow its budget from other federal agencies. Consequently, its budget has always been small, and its capacity therefore limited. By the 1960s, it was, therefore, deemed to be insufficient for sport development.

So, President Kennedy had his brother, Robert, initiate work to create a national sport development foundation that would support sport development for all Americans – from grassroots recreational sport through to elite competition. Robert continued that effort as a member of the Johnson administration, and in 1964 persuaded President Johnson to appoint John Gavin to consult with national sport leaders and develop a plan. John Gavin was a retired general, and a hero of the Army Airborne. He had served as U.S. Ambassador to France after retiring from the military. At the time he was asked to undertake the task of formulating plans for a national sport development foundation, he had left public service to become Chairman of the Board for Arthur D. Little Consulting. In fact, John Gavin and Robert Kennedy believed so strongly in the need for a sport development foundation that Gavin developed the plan without government funding, as development of the plan was funded by the Fuller Foundation and Arthur D. Little, Inc. The plan was transmitted to President Johnson shortly after his inauguration in 1965.

The expectation was that the federal government would use its influence and clout to get the foundation started, but the foundation would ultimately become a private initiative supported by its own endowments and fundraising. The proposed Sport Development Foundation was to undertake four tasks:

1. Study needs of amateur sport and advise government and the private sector on policies pursuant to those needs;
2. Coordinate private, government, and educational effort to promote sport at local, state, and federal levels;
3. Provide expertise and assistance to sports organizations for development of their programs at all levels;
4. Extend sports knowledge and its application via research and dissemination of research findings.

From a sport development perspective, the plan established the necessary basis for establishing well-resourced participation and research initiatives. However, amid the brouhaha of the Vietnam War and domestic civil rights concerns, sport became a secondary concern. The Johnson administration shelved it.

Then came the 1972 Olympic Games in Munich. Four significant disasters befell the American team.

First, Rick Demont was stripped of his gold medal in the 400 meter freestyle after it was discovered that his asthma medication contained a banned stimulant. He had told USOC doctors he was taking the medication, and had so stated on the medical forms that the USOC had him complete, but USOC officials had never told him to substitute an alternative medication. His medal and his record were forfeit. Meanwhile, Bob Seagren, the world record holder in the pole vault was told by Olympic officials at the last minute that he could not use the fiberglass pole with which he had been training and competing. He was forced to use an unfamiliar and stiffer pole, with the result that he competed poorly. An East German won. Seagren later complained that USOC officials had no idea how to appeal on his behalf.

To make matters worse, two American sprinters who were top seeded in the 100 meters were provided an incorrect schedule by USOC officials, with the result that they missed their quarterfinals and were unable to continue in the competition. The event was won by Valeri Borzov, a Soviet runner.

But the worst was yet to come. For the first time in Olympic competition, an American basketball team lost. In fact, when the buzzer first sounded, the Americans had won, 50-49. Then the referee put three seconds on the clock, and while the Americans scrambled to defense, the Soviet team put in the winning basket, making the Soviets the victors, 51-50. The American players complained that USOC officials had no idea how to appeal the referee’s decision.

As if to rub salt into the wounds, the despised ideological rival, the Soviet Union, topped the medals table – winning more golds medals and more total medals than the American team. At the same time, the communist East German team did much better than the host West...
Germans, and served notice that it would soon threaten America’s second place standing in the medals table. In an era when Cold War rivalries were being contested on Olympic playing fields, it was a national disaster.

The result was a flurry of legislative initiatives, nearly all of which proposed to put American sport under federal control. In other words, Congress was coming close to nationalizing the management and governance of sport in the United States. In order to understand the legislative momentum, it is helpful to recall just how significant the ideological contestations were as they were played out in sport. Recall that Cold War paranoia was a bipartisan platform. For example, as early as 1955, Republican Senator John Butler summarized what had been said in the national press for several years:

> It should be clearly evident to those with eyes to see that the Communists … have their sinister eyes fixed upon the 1956 Olympic Games. And their ulterior motive is to advance not the cause of fair play and sportsmanship, but international Communist domination.

Not to be outdone as he prepared to become the Democratic candidate for Vice President of the United States, Hubert Humphrey wrote in Parade Magazine:

> You may ask what the Olympics have to do with international politics. Make no mistake about it, the relentless struggle between freedom and Communism embraces almost every level of life from spacemen to sprinters. Because the Russians understand this, they have converted the once idealistic Olympic Games into an ideological battlefield. They sneer at the “AMERICANSKIS” as a nation of softies and portray the United States as a “tired, decadent, and declining power.” Once they have crushed us in the coming Olympic battle, the Red propaganda drums will thunder out a world-wide tattoo, heralding “the new Soviet men and women” as “virile, unbeatable conquerors” in sports – or anything else.

In an era of such strident Cold War rhetoric, the defeat of American athletes by athletes from communist nations was symbolically catastrophic. The fact that the American team seemed to have been mismanaged made the defeat all-the-more difficult to bear. So, Congress’s threat to nationalize sport was more than just grandstanding; it was in keeping with the tenor of the times.
It was not, however, in keeping with fundamental American ideology. As Thomas Jefferson so eloquently put it, “A wise and frugal government, which shall restrain men from injuring one another, which shall leave them otherwise free to regulate their own pursuits of industry and improvement, and shall not take from the mouth of labor the bread it has earned – this is the sum of good government.” In other words, that government is best which governs least. So, the issue needed to be solved without recourse to government control.

This was made even more vital by the implications of nationalizing sport. To do so would be tantamount to copying the communists, which would suggest that the United States acknowledged the superiority of the communist system. It did not serve Cold War interests for us to beat communists using their methods.

The White House then weighed in. In a memo to President Nixon, Assistant for Domestic Affairs, Ken Cole wrote:

In recent years, the United States has endured some unnecessary failures in international athletic competition. This is primarily due to an outdated organizational structure which results in constant quarreling among the many amateur sports bodies causing the United States to be represented internationally by teams which have been adequate but not of the highest caliber. The most visible feature of the organizational conflict is the NCAA-AAU dispute.

From what we can determine the best way to address this problem is to Congressionally amend the Federal Charter granted to the U.S. Olympic Committee…. The USOC is not the culprit but the vehicle to get at the problem…. Amendments to the USOC Charter passed by Congress could implement a solution which would keep the Federal government from any further involvement in amateur athletics.

This was a significant moment because the USOC, which had been blamed for the failures of 1972, was now being positioned as the means around the problem. The ongoing disputes between the NCAA and the AAU over jurisdiction for several sports, especially track and field, enabled the problem to be reframed from one of USOC failure to one of administrative rationalization. There were, in fact, a number of memoranda that circulated around the White House at this time providing much the same analysis.
Gerald Ford, who had recently been appointed Vice President of the United States, agreed. Writing in Sports Illustrated, he said, “Completely regimented, state supported, state-manipulated athletic programs are not for us. It is a matter of style as well as philosophy.”

Although the Nixon administration was soon distracted by the Watergate scandal, Ford appointed the President’s Commission on Olympic Sports shortly after assuming the Presidency following Nixon’s resignation. So doing achieved its most immediate purpose, as it caused legislative actions that might nationalize American sport to be halted. The Commission released its two volume report in 1977, and by 1978, Congress enacted its recommendations as the Amateur Sports Act. (The prime exception was the recommended bill of rights for athletes, which the NCAA opposed, and which was consequently omitted.)

The Act has, for better or worse, provided the legislative framework for the sport system we have today. Not surprisingly, it is precisely the solution and the system envisioned in internal White House memoranda from half a decade before. Achieving that end was the Commission’s fundamental purpose.

Thus, the Amateur Sports Act is a legacy of the Cold War. Control of U.S. sport development was given to the USOC and, through it, to the NGBs because so doing was ideologically comfortable, and seemingly capable of reducing jurisdictional disputes. The consequent failure to establish a foundation for sport development (or an enforceable requirement for one) was driven by: (a) a concern to rationalize the laissez-faire structure of American sport, (b) a desire to do something to beat communist teams, and (c) an ideological requirement that we not look like the communists when so doing. A foundation was no longer deemed necessary, as better (private sector) administration, rather than sport development, came to be viewed as the route to American international sport success.

Stated another way, the fears and concerns that shaped The Amateur Sports Act and the system we have are long past. It is time to revisit what we have and where we are going.

Envisioning the Future

Despite its roots in a bygone ideological struggle, The Amateur Sports Act does include provisions that mandate development, as we have seen. The Act requires our sport governing bodies to build participation and to establish the research base that will enable excellence. It is
not that we do not have the legislative mandate; it is, rather, that we are not following the mandate sufficiently or sufficiently well.

Although the Cold War is past, the fundamental American ideologies that call for small government rather than big government are still with us. Indeed, it could be argued that our recent economic difficulties have increased that ideology’s salience. Consequently, it is unlikely that Congress or the White House will take a role in sport development – at least not in the foreseeable future.

Therefore, it is up to those of us who work in sport and who care about sport to live up to the task. Like fine wine, the insights and proposals of the Gavin Report have improved with age. We do need to establish a foundation to support sport in all its manifestations and at all levels. This includes support of mass sport participation and sport research. It is unclear whether the new Foundation for Fitness, Sport, and Nutrition will do much for sport, or will instead focus on exercise and, especially, nutrition. Past initiatives have emphasized nutrition over physical activity, and have treated physical activity as exercise rather than sport, even though framers of some initiatives may have sought greater balance (5).

Whether the task is to be undertaken by the new Foundation for Fitness, Sport, and Nutrition, or whether a sport-specific foundation needs to be established, it is clear that there are five things a foundation for sport development needs to do:

1. Build club and league infrastructures to support year round and lifelong participation in sports.
2. Provide expert guidance to grassroots development of sport.
3. Foster joint use agreements for existing facilities so that clubs can access and use facilities owned and run by schools, religious institutions, and parks and recreation departments.
4. Develop new local facilities where needed.
5. Facilitate the movement and retention of athletes by helping them to move up, down, or to new physical locations in the sport system. This includes creation of clearly articulated developmental pathways for athletes in each sport.

If we do these things, we can rebuild this country’s sporting culture, and we can do it for people of all ages. That will provide the necessary basis for international success, not merely by elite athletes, but also by those who compete at age group and masters levels. It really is as straightforward as having a foundation that undertakes the five tasks listed.
About the Author

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NOTES


5. Amitai Etzioni provides some useful perspective on this problem at: http://healthaffairs.org/blog/2011/06/28/michelle-obamas-lets-move-is-losing-its-footing/