

Justplay phase two: data-driven decision-making for the youth sport environment

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Introduction

Insurance providers have called the Justplay program a risk-management tool. Sport governing bodies that include the Ontario Hockey Federation and the Canadian Hockey Association, have referred to the program as a development tool for sports and sports officials. The City of Kitchener Ontario won a national award--The True Spirit of Sport Community Award--that was presented by the Canadian Center for Ethics in Sport. The presentation acknowledged Kitchener's use of the Justplay program as a contributing factor in earning the award. Some stakeholders in the North American youth sport culture have hypothesized that the Justplay program will revolutionize the way in which youth sport is administered.

The Justplay program allows for a continuous, real-time monitoring of team sport environments. By providing data regarding the behaviour of coaches, players and spectators on a game-by-game basis, local associations have better insight into, and control over, the environment for which they are accountable.

The initial phase of the Justplay project was presented at the European Association of Sport Management Congress 2002. Justplay has evolved from a pilot project of one hockey association in 2001 to a commercial enterprise in 2004. The program has users that include: community soccer organizations, community hockey organizations, and semi-pro football. Community lacrosse, ball-hockey and basketball, in a number of different municipalities, have all expressed a keen interest in the program.

Method/Results

Justplay uses the sport (or "technical") official to provide the data. The technical official is the only participant (group) that has no stake in the outcome of the game. Their presence is to ensure that the game is played as fairly as possible. At the conclusion of every game, each participating official independently fills out a short questionnaire, or "Justplay Conduct Report." The conduct report includes logistical game information, identifies the official and his/her role, and uses a five point Likert scale (with 1 being very good and 5 being very poor) for the official to rate the behaviour of the coaches, players and spectators of each team. The official rates the overall conduct of each of these groups and also rates his/her own satisfaction/comfort level within the context of the game using the same scale. These cards can be put into a locked box available in the referee dressing room where they are periodically collected and the information is entered into the Justplay database. Alternatively, the data can be entered via an automated voice response system using a telephone or cell phone. With the automated system, the data enters the database immediately. It takes less than a minute for the official to provide the data with either system.

The database is used to analyze the ratings and produce a library of parsimonious reports. Access to the reports is available via the Internet on a password-privileged basis for member associations. The reports are used to provide early warning signals of problems being experienced by specific officials and to provide a means of measuring the effectiveness of any initiatives implemented to improve the situation. Each association is also provided with a unique monthly newsletter/report that summarizes positive and/or negative trends in behaviour within its' game environment. This report informs the association of regional and/or national trends within their sport and identifies their position relative to these larger trends. The monthly report also includes strategies to address concerns that are identified. For each problem identified three levels of intervention are presented: low cost/low effort, intermediate cost/intermediate effort, and high cost/high effort.

The system contains approximately 7000 pieces of behaviour data collected in various ice hockey associations, up to and including the end of the 2003- 2004 hockey season. Although there are too many observations and trends to note here, it is possible to point out some very interesting and relevant trends

that have been identified over the past three years. For example, by tracking critical incidents (any poor or very poor rating) in house league hockey, coaches have been identified as the problem approximately 45% of the time, followed by players at 33% and finally spectators at 22%. This is a noteworthy trend, given the amount of scarce resources currently being dedicated to modifying parent behaviour in the participating sport associations. Interestingly, at the Rep hockey level (travel teams), players become the problem approximately 45% percent of the time, followed by coaches at 33%, and parents remain the same at about 22%. In some Rep leagues, the problems are split 50/50 between players and coaches. Regarding hockey officials, it has been observed that officials with 25 years of experience or more distribute 75% of all critical incidents. The program has also indicated that generally officials are very tolerant of players and coaches with poor behaviour at the Novice, Atom and PeeWee levels, but less tolerant of spectators (parents) with poor behaviour at these levels. At the Bantam level however, the officials are slightly less tolerant of poor player and coach behaviour, but more tolerant of poor spectator behaviour.

Discussion

Around the world, 70% of youth sport is managed and administered by volunteers. Most of these volunteers do not have sport management, behaviour management, or business management expertise, let alone the time or financial resources required to be as effective as they would like. Justplay bridges the gap between research and application. It provides the youth sport administrator with the ability to make data-driven decisions. It helps to reduce the administrative burden of associations forced to adjudicate incidents regarding problem behaviour that are generally anecdotal in nature. The Justplay program can even predict the potential for high-risk situations, allowing associations to be pre-emptive.

It seems as if we may have reached a critical mass in regards to the atmosphere of violence, harassment and abuse that permeates youth sport. People are ready for action and change. The original goals of organized youth sport were based on virtues of sportsmanship, fun, and friendship. Even Baron de Coubertin, the father of the modern Olympics, emphasized participation and good citizenship. In order to re-establish these principles and develop generations of youth devoted to the benefits of sport, we must revolutionize the way we administer and manage youth sports. In order to do this effectively we have to establish environments of accountability, education and reform. To do this, we need programs like Justplay.

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