

Motivating Clubs To Participate In League Systems In Individual Sports — A Stimulus Contribution Theory Analysis

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Aim of research

In team sports, a league system represents the main format for competitions. But, over the last decades, especially in Germany, more and more sport federations organising individual sports have also introduced league systems. A league is characterized by a cooperative network of voluntarily associated sport clubs (Noll, 2003). Its existence and success are essentially dependent on the clubs willingness and capability to take part in the league by providing a team of selected athletes and other resources. However, a club will only take part in a league, if it can benefit from it (Szymanski, 2003). Therefore, a couple of incentives has to be provided by the league governing bodies to motivate the clubs to participate. The research question of this paper is, which incentives motivates sport clubs to participate in a league system of their individual sport and what do the clubs contribute to maintain the league competitions?

Theoretical background

The stimulus contribution theory (SCT) frames the empirical study. The SCT defines general conditions under which an organisation can motivate its members to provide contributions, and thus ensure the survival and value-creation of the organisation (Barnard, 1938; March & Simon, 1993). Usually, the SCT is used in the field of human resource management to define the relation between an organisation and the contribution of its individual members. But it can also be applied to organisations in the role as members (Schulz-Valz, 2006). In the case of league systems the clubs represent the organisational members. According to the SCT, the league's survival is assured, if it is possible to establish a balanced relation between the offered incentives by the governing body and the contributions provided by the clubs (incentive-contribution-balance). Incentives of a league system to get contributions of the participations are implemented in the design (structures and regulations) of a league (Szymanski, 2003).

Methodology

The study has an explorative character. Four case studies were executed in judo, table tennis, golf and triathlon. For data collection qualitative problem-centered interviews were carried out. Eight interviews with league organizers from the selected sport federations (two interviews in each sports) were conducted to identify the intended incentives. Furthermore, 26 interviews in total were executed with the managers of the first division's clubs of the four selected sport leagues in order to explore the valuation of the incentives, the provided contributions of the clubs and their incentive-contribution-balances. For data analysis a qualitative and quantitative content analysis was conducted.

Results

The examined individual sport leagues combine elements of the European (open league design, multiple league levels) and the North American league system (playoffs) to provide incentives for clubs. The league matches are scheduled in gaps of major international competition periods, several teams meet simultaneously to reduce the travelling costs for the clubs, or a different match system is chosen to present the sport more attractive. Particular emphasis is placed to strengthen the clubs as institutions educating sporting talents and to provide opportunities to promote the clubs through home matches. Participating in the league system offers the first division clubs psychographic (image as performance-oriented club, public attention), functional (educating talents, sporting success), social (team spirit) and economic (sponsorship commitment) benefits. The clubs themselves provide mainly financial (starting fees, travel expenses) and organizational contributions (organising home matches, athletes' acquisition and bond). All in all, the clubs' incentive-contribution-balance is positively balanced in 75% of the cases and they appreciate to participate in the league. However, in particular in judo, 80% of the clubs draw a negative balance. In the Judo league system, improvements of the league's design are demanded, e.g. more rights of co-determination or more home matches.

Conclusions

Compared to other sport competitions league governance in individual sports need specific efforts and measures, besides sporting performance criteria, to motivate clubs to become a member of a league. Using a qualitative research approach and the stimulus contribution theory, the empirical study has provided enlightening insights into the valuation of incentives and the incentive-contribution-balance from the view

of first division clubs. Further research is needed using quantitative methods and extending the number of individual sports leagues and the divisions regarded.

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