

# **ATHLETE-CENTRED SPORT**

**Discussion Paper**

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## PREAMBLE

This discussion paper represents a broad overview of the concept of athlete-centred sport. The objective of the paper is to provide some clarification of the concept, including an operational definition and signature characteristics of an athlete-centred sport system, plus elaboration of certain key issues. A number of Best Practices are cited and offered as models for implementation, and the paper concludes with a set of tools, indicators, and outcomes to assist sport organizations and agencies at all levels to develop and implement plans, programs, policies, and procedures which best reflect an athlete-centred sport system.

The paper is not intended to be an exhaustive treatment of the issue of athlete-centred sport but rather to serve as a stimulus for discussion and further development.

*This paper has been prepared by a working committee comprised of Heather Clarke, Dan Smith and Guy Thibault on behalf of the Federal/Provincial/Territorial Sport Policy Steering Committee. The contributions of Bruce Kidd, Ann Peel, John Bales, Dorothy Strachan and Paul Tomlinson, upon whose work this paper has been built, are gratefully acknowledged.*

## **1. DESCRIPTION OF AREA**

### **1.1 Operational Definition**

For the purposes of this paper, athlete is defined as any individual who engages in sport, at any level, within the context of amateur sport.

Athletes are the "raison d'être" of the sport system. Therefore, in order to maintain the integrity and value of sport, it is critical that the sport experience be positive for athletes.

The primary focus of sport should be to contribute to the all-round development of athletes as whole, healthy people through sport. Sport provides athletes with opportunities for physical expression and mastery of technical skills. Through athletic performance, athletes pursue and demonstrate excellence and experience the joy of achievement. Along with these opportunities come certain responsibilities for athletes to play fair and compete in the spirit of sport. Athlete-centred sport should help to develop in athletes the qualities of citizenship, ethical conduct and sportsmanship.

The term athlete-centred refers to both a concept and a process, rather than a single action or event. In an athlete-centred sport system, the values, programs, policies, resource allocation and priorities of sport organizations and agencies place primary emphasis on consideration of athletes' needs in a holistic sense and performance goals within that context. Those responsible for leadership and decision-making in sport must include the athlete in both defining the needs and goals and in determining how to meet them; i.e. the athlete should be the active subject in, not the object of, sporting programs.

Throughout the full range of the sport continuum, coaches play a critical role in fostering and supporting the development of athletes. Coaches provide leadership and expertise in the areas of technical, tactical, physical and mental preparation of the athlete. In a coach-led, athlete-centred system, coaches strive to help athletes achieve their goals of self-development and winning, and coaching decisions are based on the long-term, holistic development needs of athletes. Coaches facilitate the empowerment of athletes by working with them, enabling them to become more independent and self-reliant as they mature as athletes and as individuals.

At advanced levels of competition and particularly at the high performance level, athletes make a choice to focus to a greater degree on sport performance. Hence, the overall needs of the athlete become shaped by that focus. However, it is the athlete him/herself who determines the degree of focus on sport.

*(Note: In this paper, holistic refers to "whole" or "healthy", in terms of emotional, psychological and physical*

*(development. It does not necessarily mean that the overall demands on the life of the athlete outside of sport will be in balance with the athletic demands.)*

## **1.2 Broader Sport Context**

Given the level of public investment in the sport system in Canada, it is important to view the impact of sport in a broader context in addition to its effect on the personal development of individual athletes through their pursuit of athletic excellence. When the humanity of athletes is respected, the investment in athletes will be maximized, making them more likely to be contributors for net societal gain.

Sport has several significant social, cultural and economic consequences: generating spending, developing human resources through voluntarism and training for youth, employing people, teaching healthy lifestyles, developing pride in Canadian accomplishments, etc..

## **1.3 Signature Characteristics of an Athlete-Centred System**

In the development of their policies and procedures, organizations are encouraged to take into account the following desired outcomes.

- Accountability: The sport system is accountable to its consumers - the athletes and to the membership of sport organizations. To the extent that public funds are used, all who participate and engage in sport are accountable to the public to uphold the values that Canadians hold, such as fair play and ethical behaviour, within the spirit of sport.
- Dual Respect: The term is derived from child development theory on fostering self-respect. Athletes learn to value and respect themselves when they are treated with respect and are given the opportunity to exercise control over their own actions and lives. As they mature, athletes respect others (in diverse roles and for their different contributions) who have treated them with respect.
- Empowerment: Leadership and decision-making skills are developed among athletes and they are encouraged to develop and exercise their full range of abilities.
- Equity/Fairness: Training and competitive opportunities are accessible, inclusive and equitable.
- Excellence: Athletes are able to pursue and demonstrate athletic excellence because adequate facilities, qualified coaching, development opportunities and support networks exist.

- Extended Responsibility: The system recognizes the long-term impact it has on the athlete's life. Leaders make decisions considering the long-term consequences for athletes. Transitions from a focused role of athlete to other roles are facilitated. As a result, the athlete is motivated to participate in sport lifelong.
- Health: The health of athletes is safeguarded and sport contributes to overall health and well-being.
- Informed Participation: The athlete is given choices and kept aware of potential consequences and trade-offs.
- Mutual Support: The interdependence of athletes and others within the sport system in meeting objectives and solving problems is recognized. Both the accomplishments and the efforts are celebrated.
- Rights: The athlete's rights are clearly defined and outlined, mutually agreed upon, and safeguarded.

(Note: This section has been adapted from Strachan and Tomlinson, *Coaching Code of Ethics*, 1993)

## 1.4 Key Issues

### 1.4.1 What would be the performance objectives for such a system?

The system should be evaluated in terms of its contribution to both the athletic performance and the holistic development of athletes. Key questions should include the following:

- Is the sport experience positive for athletes?
- What proportion of athletes continue to participate in the sport system and for how long?
- Does the system enable athletes to achieve their athletic potential and meet their competitive goals or do athletes leave sport prematurely due to dissatisfaction with their sport experience?
- Do athletes receive quality coaching and technical support?
- Do athletes have access to appropriate training and competitive opportunities?
- Do athletes compete within the principles of fair play and the spirit of sport?

The system should also be assessed on the basis of its impact on developing the following characteristics in athletes:

- technical skills and abilities
- self-knowledge and self-esteem

- moral integrity
- leadership skills
- teamwork
- respect for other competitors

1.4.2 Upon which criteria will athletes be judged and rewarded? To what extent should subjective criteria, including personal characteristics of athletes, be taken into consideration in team selection decisions?

The sport system has moved in recent years to an increased weighting on objective performance measures in the interest of ensuring fairness in selection decisions. The inclusion of certain subjective, qualitative criteria, assessed by qualified individuals, can also be justified. It is essential that clear selection criteria are published and communicated to athletes well in advance of the team selection process.

1.4.3 What special considerations should be made in addressing athlete-centred sport for athletes of varying ages and experience?

Much of this paper addresses the issue of athlete-centred sport from the perspective of more experienced athletes in competitive sport, particularly high performance athletes. The needs of athletes at younger age levels will be somewhat different and the system must be flexible to accommodate these unique needs. Parents will also play a more significant role in determining the scope and implementation of athlete-centred principles for young and less-experienced athletes.

1.4.4 How do we reconcile the pursuit of competitive goals with the potential health and injury risks for high performance athletes?

In an athlete-centred system, every effort is made to ensure protection of the health and well-being of the athlete, including the following steps:

- well planned and monitored training programs
- regular medical monitoring of athletes
- preventive medical care
- nutritional counselling and monitoring
- safety and risk management procedures for competitions

## 2. BEST PRACTICES

### 2.1 Positive Models for Implementation

*Note: This is not meant to be an exhaustive list, nor does it in any way imply that the programs, services,*

*policies, etc. listed here could not be improved upon. However, the intent here is to find areas to build upon.*

- Arctic Winter and Dene Games: The goal was to come together, share an experience and learn. Mutual support is addressed in the sense that competitors become mentors and coaches to each other
- Athlete Association: Supported by the sport system
- Athlete Assistance Program: Funding goes directly to athlete
- AAP Extended Athletes' Assistance: Extended responsibility to athletes beyond high performance sport career
- AAP Tuition Waiver: The importance of post-secondary education is underlined
- Athlete Advocate presence at Commonwealth Games: Athlete rights and extended responsibility were addressed
- Athlete Services component of the National Multi-Sport Development Centre in Calgary: One of the major programs to be offered through the NMSDC is the provision of an array of services to athletes, including personal, educational and career counselling; liaison with schools; and housing assistance
- Canadian Athletes Association (CAA) Leadership Award, Community Service Award: These awards set up both extended responsibility concept, of athletes to their community, and give support for efforts
- CAA Athlete Leadership Forum: Athlete representatives are empowered and informed
- Canadian Olympic Association (COA) Olympic Athletes' Career Centre: Addresses the extended responsibility issue
- Canadian Volleyball Association (CVA) Mentor Program: Important in terms of mutual support, empowerment and extended responsibility issues
- Coaches' Code of Conduct: This is an important step, particularly if the community standard is raised by peers (addresses dual respect and accountability)
- Commonwealth Games (Victoria): The Athletes' Declaration
- Community Youth Sports Service of Atikokan: The goal of this group is to provide constructive lifestyle alternatives for Atikokan youth through sport
- Disabled Athletes with Able-Bodied Athletes at Commonwealth Games in Victoria: This was an opportunity to be inclusive and to value diversity
- Olympic Academy: The academy has served an important role in helping people understand Olympism, and understand the role sport plays in our society
- Role Model Programs: Ontario's F.A.M.E. program (Females Athletes Motivating Excellence) promotes self-esteem for young people (empowerment, mutual support).

### **3. TOOLS/INDICATORS**

#### **3.1 A Checklist for Sport Organizations (clubs, PSOs, NSOs, etc.) to Assess their Progress in Becoming Athlete-Centred**

**3.1.1** Mission, objects and goals statements place athletes as the central focus of planning, administration, program design and implementation, and include the following values:

- a) the athlete is recognized as a whole person and encouraged to flourish, with competitive athletics as an important but only one part of their life experience;
- b) the athlete's physical and psychological health and safety are protected;
- c) athletes' rights and obligations are understood and respected; and
- d) the athlete-coach relationship and the infrastructure required to support the development of the athlete are central.

**3.1.2** Elected Athletes' Councils are supported by the sport organization and are a criterion for continued sport activity, such that:

- a) they receive funding to meet regularly and to communicate with the athletes;
- b) they are integrated into policy and program development; and
- c) the councils designate appropriate athletes for key committees and boards of directors.

**3.1.3** Elected athlete representatives are fully funded to attend:

- a) board meetings;
- b) key committee meetings;
- c) Canadian Athlete Association Athlete Leadership Forum;
- d) Canadian Sport Council General Assembly; and
- e) other important fora.

**3.1.4** Elected athlete representatives are directly involved in developing policies and procedures for:

- a) codes of conduct;
- b) selection;
- c) discipline;
- d) harassment;
- e) grievance;
- f) Appeal; and
- g) Health and Safety
- h) Other issues of importance as they arise

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- 3.1.5 Athletes are educated about the sport system (both domestic and international), policies and procedures within their organizations and external affecting them and any changes.
  - 3.1.6 Athletes are equal partners in determining the content of Athlete-Sport Organization Agreements. Training regimes and competition schedules are mutually agreed upon. Accountability measures are agreed upon and included for both partners.
  - 3.1.7 Performance goals are mutually agreed upon. Coaches and other sport leaders avoid placing athletes in situations where they are confronted with externally imposed moral dilemmas, such as the setting of performance goals which can not be achieved using fair and ethical means. Athletes share this responsibility for striving for excellence within an ethical framework.
  - 3.1.8 Athlete environments are assessed to ensure holistic development
  - 3.1.9 Injury/accident incidence is monitored, analyzed and steps/measures are taken to ensure prevention. Extended health benefits and living allowances are available to injured athletes.
  - 3.1.10 Harassment is prevented by educational programs and monitoring. Policies and procedures are in place to deal with harassment, should it occur. Support systems are in place to assist athletes who have been harassed.
  - 3.1.11 Quality of coaching is high (level of certification, ratio of athletes to coaches).
  - 3.1.12 Decisions and reallocation of resources are based on stated priority and values related to the holistic development of athletes.
  - 3.1.13 Developmental and competitive opportunities exist to help athletes reach their athletic potential.

### **3.2 Checklist for System-Wide Policy and Plan Development**

- 3.2.1 Mechanisms are in place to facilitate direct athlete involvement in decision-making which impacts on athletes in sport organizations at all levels (community to national).

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- 3.2.2 Athlete rights are standardized and not sport-dependent. Internal appeal procedures honour the principles of natural justice, fairness, and no apprehension of bias by having, for instance, notice of hearing and of the case to be met, written decisions, the right to representation, third party decision makers, and the right to appeal to an arbitration board.
  - 3.2.3 An Alternative Dispute Resolution Mechanism is established that operates independently of the sport organizations.
  - 3.2.4 An Athlete Ombudsperson office is established and an Athlete Advocate is included in all Games mission complements.
  - 3.2.5 The Canadian Athletes' Association receives support and funding to address directly issues of common concern to athletes.
  - 3.2.6 The National Coaching Certification Plan educates coaches to nurture and facilitate empowerment of their athletes, thereby redressing the existing coach/athlete power- imbalance.
  - 3.2.7 The Canadian Professional Coaches Association is empowered to regulate and delicense coaches.
  - 3.2.8 All sport system partners commit to collaborate in the design and delivery of a more effective system which is free of barriers and is better integrated to meet the needs of all athletes from entry level through to the highest levels of international performance.
  - 3.2.9 Existing government, NSO, PSO and MSO programs and services are comprehensively and regularly reviewed and evaluated against the athlete-centred standard.

### **3.3 Outcomes**

- 3.3.1 Athletes view their sport experience as positive and worth repeating (cf. Peter Donnelly's study).
- 3.3.2 Athletes have the opportunity to reach their competitive goals and athletic potential.
- 3.3.3 Conflicts and disputes are resolved fairly.
- 3.3.4 Athletes' incomes rise substantially above poverty level (independent of family support).

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- 3.3.5 Athletes have a real opportunity to pursue secondary and post-secondary education both during and after athletic careers.
  - 3.3.6 Use of banned substances is reduced/eliminated.
  - 3.3.7 Athletes play fair in the "spirit of sport".
  - 3.3.8 Athletes remain as participants in the sport system in some capacity after their competitive careers.
  - 3.3.9 The number of Canadians who actively engage in sport, thereby deriving benefit from sport, increases.
  - 3.3.10 The Canadian sport system is free of barriers and is better integrated to meet the needs of all athletes from entry level through to the highest levels of international performance.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

Leaders at all levels of the Canadian sport system have an important role to play in advancing the concept of athlete-centred sport. They have a responsibility to ensure that sport contributes to the all-round development of athletes as whole, healthy people through sport and that all who participate in sport have an opportunity to experience the many positive benefits and values of sport. In order to realize this vision, there must be a commitment by all sport organizations and agencies to take concrete steps to establish plans with clear and measurable goals, and to monitor progress towards achievement of these goals.