Exploring Roller Derby Athletes’ Recruitment, Retention, and Advancement

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Introduction
Roller derby is distinct from other sports due to its do-it-yourself (DIY) approach to managing leagues and empowering qualities (Pavlidis, 2012). The uniqueness of roller derby generates both benefits (e.g., player control over the sport) and challenges (e.g., the limited ability to foster mass participation) (Beaver, 2012). To date, research into roller derby has focused on the DIY management approach (Beaver, 2012), gendered stereotypes (Parry, 2016), and body image (Strübel & Petrie, 2016). Few studies, however, have examined roller derby athletes’ recruitment, retention, and advancement. Understanding this topic will help roller derby leagues increase participation and nurture athletes’ commitment. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate the challenges and strategies of recruitment, retention, and advancement among roller derby athletes.

Theoretical Framework
Green’s (2005) normative theory of sport development informed our study. This framework postulates that significant others often facilitate athletes’ entrance to a sport. The existence of small, local-level programs and infrastructure also contributes to initial recruitment. Once athletes are involved in a sport, motivation, socialization, and commitment play a crucial role in retention. As athletes’ skills improve, Green (2005) noted that they should transition to a higher level of training and competition. She also suggested that sport programs should foster organizational linkages to ease athletes into more advanced teams.

Methods
Photovoice methodology was adopted in this study (Wang & Burris, 1997). Before the interview, we asked participants to select photos that represented their roller derby experiences. During the interview, participants were asked to describe what was happening in the photos and why photos were chosen. Additionally, we asked general questions about sport involvement, such as “How did you become involved in roller derby? and “Why did you participate?” We conducted 10 interviews with roller derby athletes through purposeful sampling. Interview transcripts were coded thematically by three researchers to ensure inter-coder reliability (Creswell, 2012).

Findings and Discussion
Preliminary findings indicate that most participants were introduced to roller derby through word of mouth or advertisement. However, some teams faced recruitment challenges, such as a shortage of coaches to train newcomers, inability to secure a stable practice facility, and more competitive teams limiting opportunities for beginners and recreational participants. Meanwhile, some teams had difficulty retaining athletes due to high athlete turnover in a college town, strict attendance policies, or financial constraints. When some athletes advanced to a travel team, their home teams suffered from reduced players. In response, teams adopted various strategies, such as senior athletes serving as volunteer coaches to teach beginners, setting up boot camps, and developing a more cohesive team by engaging in activities outside of roller derby. Our findings provide insights into how roller derby leagues can negotiate diverse skill levels among athletes and build more sustainable local programs through partnering with community organizations, succession planning, and targeted recruitment. The present study supports the tenets of Green’s (2005) normative theory and contributes to the literature by applying it to a context that has a mix of recreational and competitive athletes.