Community Development and Sport Participation

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Many sport organizations face the challenge of declining sport participation. Traditional methods of addressing this challenge such as promotional ads and top-down initiatives that ignore community needs have not succeeded in sustaining sport participation. This action research study assessed the impact of the building tennis communities model, a community development approach based on three key elements: identifying a community champion, developing collaborative partnerships, and delivering quality sport programming. Eighteen communities across Canada were supported by the national sport governing body, Tennis Canada, to participate in the study. Findings demonstrated that communities were able to identify a community champion and deliver quality programs that aimed to increase and sustain tennis participation; however, partnership building was implemented in a very preliminary and incomplete manner. Recommendations about the benefits of using a community development approach to not only increase sport participation but also develop communities through sport are presented with implications for researchers, policy makers, and practitioners.

Declining or stagnant sport participation has been a global concern in recent years. Much of this concern has been focused on the links between physical inactivity and health-related issues such as obesity, diabetes, and heart disease (Foster, 2000; Pate et al., 1995; Tremblay & Willms, 2000; World Health Assembly, 2002). National governments and international agencies have expressed concern about the relationship between declining sport participation and social issues such as increasing rates of crime, drug use, and community development (Bloom, Grant, & Watt, 2005; Boshoff, 1997; Burnett, 2001; Burnett & Hollander, 1999; Crabbe, 2000; Cunningham & Beneforti, 2005; Lawson, 2005; Nichols, 2004). Furthermore, from a socioeconomic perspective, it has been shown that sport participation benefits the economy by reducing health costs (Bloom et al.; Cameron, Craig, & Beaulieu, 2000; Katzmarysk, Gledhill, & Shephard, 2000). Although some sport managers might be less focused on societal issues, all are concerned about the negative effect that low participation numbers have on the financial viability of their organizations and the extent to which lower participation numbers will impact the talent identification of elite athletes and the development of their sport.
Regardless of the reason for concern or the rationale for action, sport managers have typically relied on traditional marketing promotions to entice individuals to join their organizations (e.g., ads in local papers, flyers, etc.) or have used traditional sport development strategies, often limited to the launching of national programs (top-down versus input from bottom-up) to increase participation delivered either nationally or regionally in a uniform manner across the country for a fixed period of time. Most communities are exposed briefly (e.g., one season or one camp) to such an initiative (sometimes referred to as the *shotgun* approach to increasing participation), and seldom are either the needs of the community assessed before introducing an initiative or is capacity built to sustain the initiative in the longer term. To date, the implementation of these traditional strategies has failed to halt declining participation. Recently, a number of researchers have examined specific sport participation initiatives that have described the process of sustained sport participation (Boshoff, 1997; Burnett & Hollander, 1999; Chalip & Green, 1998; Green, 2005; Green & Chalip, 1997). In addition, researchers have lamented the lack of a comprehensive examination and evaluation of sport development initiatives. In particular, Smith and Waddington (2004) and Green have argued that the contribution of research on sport participation to policy makers (and research itself) has been hindered by a lack of theoretical development and that the monitoring and evaluation of such programs require both theoretical and empirically grounded arguments.

This research builds on the work of Green (2005) and others by linking a specific sport participation initiative with a conceptual framework of sport participation and by arguing and empirically demonstrating that traditional strategies to address sport participation ignore the complexity of the problem of declining participation in sport and overlook a fundamental principle of participation—community development. Specifically, the purpose of this study was to assess the usefulness of a community development approach to increasing and sustaining sport participation using action research methodology. In the next section the conceptual framework is described using arguments from the community development literature. This is followed by an overview of the research context and methods. The third section discusses the findings of the research as they relate to the use of community development concepts. The final section provides conclusions and implications for further research.

**Community Development and Sport Development**

Community development has been defined many different ways in the literature (Christenson, Fendley, & Robinson, 1989; Hutchison & Nogradi, 1996; United Nations, 1955). Although it has been interpreted to mean different things to different people in different places, the fundamental element of all community development initiatives is about people helping people improve their life conditions by addressing common interests. Pedlar (1996) points out that community development is about a change process that might be facilitated by others but is self-determined by the community. She argues,

> Community development in its purest form incorporates flexibility, negotiation of social interests, redefinition of power relations, and a realization that process is in itself valuable. . . . In relation to process, community development is
centrally concerned with education—teaching and facilitating on the part of the community development worker, and learning and doing for oneself on the part of the individual or community. Thus, a concern is with assisting individuals and groups so that they may initiate a process of helping themselves. (pp. 13–14)

For Pedlar, such a process is enabling and empowering—giving individuals and groups the capacity to determine means and ends.

There has been considerable interest in using community development approaches for health promotion by the health sector (Kang, 1995; Schuftan, 1996; Smith, Baugh Littlejohns, & Thompson, 2001) and to address socioeconomic disadvantages (e.g., Diamond, 2004; Kirk & Shutte, 2004; Simpson, Wood, & Daws, 2003). In addition, a number of researchers have investigated community development with respect to its applicability to recreation and leisure services (e.g., Frisby & Millar, 2002; Hutchison & Nogradi, 1996; Karlis, Auger, & Gravelle, 1996; Pedlar, 1996; Reid & van Dreunen, 1996; Stormann, 1996). Reid and van Dreunen concluded that “the community development approach to community work and organization is perhaps the most appropriate implementing strategy when leisure is required to function in this way [as a means rather than an end]” (p. 61). More recently, Frisby and Millar investigated the use of a community development approach to increase the involvement of women living below the poverty line in local sport and recreation activities. Over the course of their 3-year study, a community development model emerged with six dimensions, including a shared concern about a social problem requiring action, encouraging the active participation of a marginalized group, forming public-sector partnerships to pool resources and build political support, adopting collaborative principles of organizing, collectively developing and implementing action plans, and reconceptualizing traditional notions of accountability (Frisby & Millar).

Although community development has been seen by researchers, practitioners, and policy makers as a way to address health, poverty, and leisure, its contribution to addressing the issue of declining sport participation has been sporadic. Vail (1992, 1993) argued for a community development approach to improve communication and collaboration among community partners involved in the provision of sport at the local level. In the research conducted by Boshoff (1997) on the application of a community development approach in South Africa, several benefits (e.g., initiation of new community sport events) and challenges (e.g., difficulty in reaching those disadvantaged leaders who would have benefited from training) were identified. Lawson (2005) expressed the need for sport, exercise, and physical activity professionals to develop capacities in empowerment and community development so that they could contribute to sustainable, integrated social and economic development. The work of these researchers highlights the complexity of the process(es) that underpins a community development approach. Although there is some support in the literature for considering community development approaches in sport, the dominant strategies that have been used to increase participation development are most often developed and delivered by national or provincial or territorial sport organizations with little or no community involvement. One of the underlying assumptions of this system is that those in managerial positions have the expertise and experience required to make effective and efficient decisions. In contrast, a
central tenant of the community development approach is that the involvement of all citizens in community (sport) matters. As Hutchison and Nogradi (1996) stated, “The intent of community development is to educate and involve citizens in the process of individual empowerment and community change” (p. 104).

In spite of the fact that there has been much written about community development, guidelines for the actual implementation and evaluation of the approach have not been clearly defined in the literature. It has only been in recent years that community development implementation models have been documented and pilot tested. The ever-changing environments of communities add to the complexity of developing an implementation model that can be used consistently, so models must be flexible enough to accommodate a specific community’s needs and priorities while adhering to the main tenants of community development theory. A review of the literature uncovered four core components that help define community development, explain how it contributes to increasing and sustaining sport participation, and what is required for a community development approach to work.

**Community Selection**

The focus of this core component is on responding to a challenge or opportunity and assessing community readiness. A crisis that threatens the viability of the community or an opportunity to enhance the quality of life in the community is often the driving force for community-based action (Frank & Smith, 1999). For example, Boshoff’s (1997) research explored the need for trained sport administrators in economically depressed communities, focusing on community empowerment, and Frisby and Millar’s (2002) participant action research with women living below the poverty line responded to the problem of the lack of recreational opportunities for this community group. The crisis in both of these cases was a lack of sport or leisure opportunities at the community level.

It is also important to select communities in which there is a “readiness” or capacity for change. In their research on low-income women and leisure opportunities, Frisby, Crawford, and Dorer (1997) stressed the importance of acknowledging the participants’ capacity to identify issues and define problems from their own points of view. The idea of community development as a process is closely aligned with capacity building, which implies building on the strengths of a community and developing the skills, knowledge, and leadership such that the community (i.e., individuals, groups, and organizations) is capable of recognizing and solving local problems (Frank & Smith, 1999; Goodman et al., 1998; Kirk & Shutte, 2004; Simpson et al., 2003). Capacity building not only requires skills, people, and plans but also motivation, commitment, economic and financial resources, policy development and supportive institutions, and physical resources.

Community development is based on the premise that community sustainability can be improved over time in a self-sufficient action-oriented manner. The social and health benefits of this approach include a sense of shared purpose among citizens, a building of trust, and a sense of control over individual and community life—generally more empowered, competent, self-confident people who collectively contribute to community health and well-being (Smith et al., 2001). Capacity is assessed differently for each community but relates to the quality and quantity of human, physical, and financial resources that a community has to assist with the change process.
Finding a Community Champion/Catalyst

Even if a community is ready for change, a catalyst from within the community is needed to spark action. Emphasizing collaborative leadership or the need for a catalyst, a leadership component was identified as a central theme throughout the literature related to community development and community capacity building (Centre for Collaborative Planning, 2000; Frank & Smith, 1999; Goodman et al., 1998; Huxham & Vangen, 2000; Kirk & Shutte, 2004; Luke, 1998). A catalyst for community development is an individual or group who believes change is possible and is willing to take the first steps needed to create interest and support. The individual or group believes in the power of people to build healthy communities and is well connected and respected. This catalyst is needed to identify appropriate community partners and to initiate action in the community. Goodman et al. (1998) emphasized the connection between citizen participation and leadership in their description of community capacity: these two dimensions are connected “in that a community lacks capacity when its leadership does not have a strong base of actively involved residents” (pp. 161–162). Furthermore, their description of leadership is intimately linked to capacity and community building when they argued that it included “formal and informal leaders,” “encouraging participation from a wide variety of community participants,” and “connectedness to other leaders” (p. 261). Frank and Smith (1999) suggested that a community development catalyst creates a vision of what is possible and promotes discussion among community members, creating interest, energy, and commitment to action. Similarly, Huxham and Vangen (2000) argued that the need for an individual in the community to “champion” the issue is an important piece of the community development approach.

Traditional leadership models and theories (e.g., traits, style, contingency, transformational) are not applicable in collaborative settings because they presume both a formal leader–follower relationship and specific goals that the leader sets out to achieve (Luke, 1998; Vangen & Huxham, 2002). By contrast, Vangen and Huxham suggested that there are four related activities that define successful leadership in a collaborative context: embracing, empowering, involving, and mobilizing. These are similar to the four tasks that Luke outlined for catalytic leadership: raising awareness, bringing diverse stakeholders together, developing strategies, and sustaining action over time. Luke indicated that problems today are complex and “cross jurisdictional, organizational, functional, and generational boundaries” (p. 7) and, therefore, cannot be solved by the leadership of one individual, one organization, or one jurisdiction. Rather, he argued, for a leadership process that shifts and is shared among stakeholders, “authority and responsibility to solve the problem require diverse, independent stakeholders to come together around a common interest, mobilizing or galvanizing collective action” (p. 19). Generally, in the context of collaborations, there are no hierarchical relationships and the collaborative group sets goals. Much of the leadership activity involves supporting the members of the groups to allow them to work more effectively with each other. Kirk and Shutte (2004) called this “leadership as a process” rather than the traditional view of leadership “as a person.” They stated,

An influencing factor in this shift to a process focus of leadership is the fact that enterprises in the past decade have found themselves working in a range of different partnership arrangements with other organizations. These
inter-professional, inter-departmental, inter-agency patterns of working on projects where collaboration is required from stakeholders from different sectors of the business and the community increasingly breaks down the norm of work that is contained within organizational boundaries and organizational hierarchies. (p. 236)

Among the applied community development models that were reviewed, many did not address the community champion or catalyst directly, although in this literature it was assumed that someone or some organization (often their own) would intervene in each case to set the community in motion.

**Building the Collaborative, Multisectoral Group/Community Partners**

Community members are identified and brought together to find common ground. *Community collaboration* is defined as an inclusive, representative group of community members who come together to work toward a common vision. This might include representatives from individuals and representatives from organizations in such sectors as churches, recreation and sport clubs, health and human services agencies, local business, law enforcement, education, and so on. Roles and responsibilities for each sector are defined at this stage. Support systems for members of the team are put into place (e.g., job descriptions, meeting schedules), conflicts are addressed, and preliminary planning is undertaken.

There is a tremendous amount of research on the topic of partnerships. Whether the terminology used is *linkages, alliances, or collaborations*, all researchers emphasize the importance of knowing how to develop, manage, and evaluate successful partnerships (James, 1999; Thibault & Harvey, 1997). Also emphasized by these authors is the fact that most organizations do not know how to do this and treat the partnering process very casually, most often resulting in less than desirable results.

Researchers do not appear to have reached consensus on using one term to discuss partnering, and many of the terms are used interchangeably. For the purposes of this discussion, the following definition of partnership will be used: “an on-going arrangement between two or more parties, based upon satisfying specifically identified, mutual needs” (Uhlik, 1995, p. 14). This definition assumes that the needs are identifiable and readily understood.

One of the key preconditions needed for the formation of partnerships is that all stakeholders must perceive that the stakes are high and that interdependence with the other organizations is strong. If all stakeholders do not share this perception, some partners will not commit resources or will do little or no work to address the needs (James, 1999). One of the most important factors in ensuring that the partners all share the perception of high stakes and interdependence is the need for a motivational leader or convener (i.e., champion). When a champion brings stakeholders together through less formal channels, the champion’s authority rests in his or her credibility (James). When stakeholders support the authority of the champion informally, it is usually because the individual is trusted.

The aspect of partnering that appears to be least understood by researchers is the process itself. Uhlik (1995) identified a number of steps for the implementation of partnerships in recreation. The first step included educating oneself about partnerships...
and the needs and resources of others. The second step involved conducting a needs assessment and resources inventory to identify common needs and potential areas of shared resources. The third step focused on the identification of potential partners by researching not only the needs and resources that a potential stakeholder might bring but also the organization’s mission and accountability. Finally, the fourth step was to compare and contrast the needs and resources of potential stakeholders to ensure that those asked to come to the table would generally receive equal levels of benefit from the partnership arrangement. Uhlik then suggested that a partnership proposal be developed that describes the “objectives, intentions and outcomes, while emphasizing mutual benefits and shared resources” (p. 21). If this written proposal is accepted, the convener then steps fully into the role of facilitating the partnered planning process. An additional step identified by Decker and Mattfeld (1995) was the evaluation of the partnership itself for continued development and improvement. To determine whether collaboration will perform well, Huxham and Vangen (2001) stated that inclusion of stakeholders, partner selection, mutual trust, consistency of position, shared vision, concrete goals, mutual interdependence of members, appropriate governance structure, and skilled conveners were key factors. Again, it is clear that partnerships and collaborations add to the complexity of the community development approach. In recognizing this complexity, Linden (2002) talked about the individual hurdles to collaboration (or partnering). He included on his list the need for power, self-serving bias, fear of losing control, lack of trust among the principals, and turf concerns. In addition, it should be emphasized that although there needs to be strong leadership within the partnership, this must be shared such that there is a balance of power among partners, each understanding his or her contribution and appreciating the interdependence and benefits of the partnership (Waddock & Bannister, 1991).

For the purposes of this research, partnership building followed Bradshaw’s (2000) and Luke’s (1998) understanding that community development is increasingly adopted to address a complex set of social and economic issues and, as such, requires a collaborative effort across organizations and jurisdictions. Inherent to the community development approach is its emphasis on inclusiveness and collaborative decision-making. The creation of partnerships among key community leaders is seen as central to building capacity. In emphasizing the value of forming sector partnerships to pool resources and build political support, Frisby and Millar (2002) stated, “partnering helped to legitimize the project and created political pressure for change in the policies and practices of local government, while reducing the exclusion of women in political affairs” (p. 222). Shared leadership and consensus decision-making were also used with success in this study.

For the most part, sport leaders’ understanding of partnership building is limited. There appears to be a level of comfort around private–public partnership arrangements that center on the exchange of goods and services—most often called sponsorship agreements. Beyond this, evidence of sport organizations establishing partnerships for the purpose of addressing community needs, using sport as the vehicle for doing so, is minimal. Although research from different sectors supports the value of partnered approaches, the sport sector appears to remain very isolated in its approach to addressing community needs and issues. Vail’s (1992) study on the nature and extent of the community sport delivery system in a large Canadian city found that community sport provider groups did not communicate with each other, the role of the parks and recreation department was central to the effectiveness
of the community sport delivery system, and that a number of organizations (i.e., schools, sport clubs, private facilities) were unknowingly competing against each other and duplicating programs and services. Similar limitations were also identified by Frisby, Thibault, and Kikulis (2004) in their investigation of undermanaged partnerships of leisure service departments in local government when they found that most lacked the capacity to effectively manage numerous and complex partnerships. Furthermore, they emphasized that more attention needed to be devoted to the managing of the partnership agreements once they were in place.

**Promoting Sustainability Through Community Development Processes**

Promoting sustainability through community development processes requires a commitment to asset-based planning, implementation, and evaluation activities that will result in sustained change. Asset-based planning requires community leaders to identify the assets in the community and to implement a strategic planning process that builds on current assets to address the issue or opportunity. This approach is reinforced by Frisby et al. (1997) who argue that in order to develop trust and build supportive networks, the audit of existing services and resources in the community must involve the community group members, not just the researcher or an intervention team from outside the community. The same principle applies to the entire planning process. Community members must tackle such planning-based questions as, What is our vision? What resources do we currently have that will help us get there? Who will do what and when? How will we know if we have been successful? Building on strength and the mobilization of assets is critical to the successful implementation of the plan. Shared leadership among the collaborative group is also essential. Frank and Smith (1999) stressed that a community development plan is “only as meaningful as the time it reflects and the people who create it” (p. 53). People are motivated to support the plan when they believe that it will benefit the community and when they have been actively involved in a planning process for which their contributions are recognized and respected.

The most important aspect of this phase is ensuring that the activities established in the community will continue after a pilot project ends. Developing sustainability should be part of the initial strategy that maintains and builds the commitment and enthusiasm of stakeholders and the general community. The challenge of creating and sustaining sport activity is often further compounded by the differing interpretations of sport governing bodies and community members regarding the objectives of sport and recreation programs. This was highlighted in Burnett and Hollander’s (1999) work when they stated,

> For governing bodies and politicians, the main focus was to deliver sport to communities, as a way of indirectly addressing human development and community needs. For [community] members lower down in the sports and political hierarchy, this sports-centered approach was questioned in their quest for human development and their need to use sport to “normalize” community life. (p. 248)

Agreement and understanding of common objectives by both sport and community leaders is central to ensuring sustainability. Lawson (2005) asked whether
or not sport, exercise, and physical education professionals actually empower the
people they serve and contribute to community development, implying that most
often the emphasis is on sport development at the expense of human development.
He also emphasized the importance of changing sport systems to better address
sustainable development in communities from a global perspective.

For communities the question is, Why would they be interested in increasing
and sustaining participation in sport? First, it is the community level at which the
awareness and the benefits of the link between involvement in sport and healthy
communities (e.g., lower crime rates, fewer health problems, more empowered
citizens) are directly experienced. Second, it is the community level at which “learn
to” programs are offered and exposure to sport occurs so that there is a pragmatic
interest—more demand equals more revenue.

This review and synthesis of the literature has uncovered key components to
a community development approach. It should be noted, however, that although
the components are presented as distinct for ease of understanding, in application
these components are highly interdependent, resulting in a community develop-
ment process that is iterative rather than linear in nature. The remainder of the
article reports on a specific case of community development for increasing and
sustaining sport participation. Specifically, the sport of tennis has been used as the
case study for the testing of the building tennis communities (BTC) model. In the
next section the case study setting and context of the study are examined in detail.
This is followed by a methods section that outlines the mixed methods procedures
used to empirically examine the community development strategy adopted by one
sport organization.

**Research Context**

Similar to many other sports, the sport of tennis experienced a decline in participa-
tion in the 1990s. Between 1992 and 1998, for example, there was a 12% decline
(Statistics Canada, 2000). This trend continued with a further 21% decline between
1998 and 2002 (Charlton Research, 2002). The decline in participation, coupled
with market research undertaken by Tennis Canada in 1997 that found that much
of the tennis being played in Canada was occurring outside of the club system
in public parks (Pollara Incorporated, 1997), indicated that club-based delivery
systems aimed at increasing participation were not working. It became evident to
those in Tennis Canada concerned about declining participation that there needed
to be a link between tennis clubs, the source of most community tennis leadership
and expertise, and municipal parks and recreation departments to ensure that the
thousands of people who first try tennis on public courts have a positive experience
and opportunities to continue playing the game. Often the tennis played on public
courts is unsupported, such that new players have difficulty finding people to play
with or there is no booking system, resulting in long waiting periods at the courts.
Addressing these issues was a key concern for Tennis Canada and encouraged the
association to develop and implement a new approach to growing the game. Tennis

Tennis Canada’s readiness to consider alternative types of service delivery
provided the opportunity to apply and assess a community development approach
to addressing Tennis Canada’s objectives of increasing and sustaining participation.
At a Tennis Canada national/provincial staff meeting that I facilitated, discussion took place about what it was that tennis leaders were trying to accomplish in communities through this strategy. A community was defined as a geographically based area such as a village, town, or city. The 15 staff members then agreed that their collective vision of a “healthy tennis community” was as follows:

- More people playing tennis
- More people moving through the tennis pathway (i.e., a continuum of tennis activities and programming for participants who have never picked up a tennis racquet to those that play regularly in competitive leagues)
- A range of linked pathway programs
- Sufficient certified instructors
- Passionate community champions
- Committed community partners
- Sufficient, accessible, and well-maintained facilities

It was also agreed at this meeting that maximum implementation flexibility was needed in each province to address different geographical and cultural needs. Tennis Canada addressed this through its funding support guidelines that provided flexibility in the implementation of a community development approach in each province and community. Provincial associations identified communities that they felt were ready to apply to the BTC strategy; applications were evaluated by Tennis Canada, and approved grant monies were sent. The provincial associations then forwarded the funds to their respective BTC community champions.

The mandate of the BTC strategy is to bring more people into the game of tennis and to keep them playing the game for life, in this way facilitating both growth and sustainability. The approach is based on the philosophy that tennis has a role to play in community development and, if seen by community leaders as a valuable asset to the community, will be supported accordingly. Embracing a community development approach was a different way of thinking about increasing tennis participation for most of the tennis staff, many of whom were more comfortable with traditional sport marketing techniques. Given the urgency of the need to address falling participation numbers, however, it was agreed by all to test this approach.

### The Building Tennis Communities Model

In an effort to guide the implementation and eventual evaluation process, I designed a model that focused on three key elements that had emerged through discussions with Tennis Canada national and provincial staff members: community champions, community partners, and the tennis pathway (see Figure 1). These three model elements were seen by these tennis leaders as being critical to the development of healthy tennis communities. The model was created and implemented before a literature review was undertaken, however, and substantial support for the BTC model became evident after the related community development research was compiled and analyzed. It should be noted that the community selection component from the literature review does not appear in the Figure 1 because it precedes the model implementation. The provincial association staff members selected communities
based on their assessment of opportunity and readiness. The national and provincial staff members agreed together that in order for a community to be included in the implementation of the model, a community champion must be confirmed, and the community must have access to tennis courts. It should also be noted that tennis pathways per se is not addressed in the four components of the literature review discussed earlier. The literature review focused on the work of various authors who had tested or investigated the use of different forms of community development approaches in their research, regardless of the technical nature of their subject matter, in order to provide conceptual grounding for a community development approach to increasing and sustaining sport participation. In this tennis-specific model, tennis activities are seen as the tools of community development.

**Community Champion**

A community champion was defined as a person who is passionate about tennis and well connected to other community leaders (e.g., youth group leaders, town or city counselors, health professionals, police, local business people) in his or her city or
town. Community champions might be retired persons, teachers, entrepreneurs, or tennis club coaches or volunteers—anyone with the time, interest, and a general understanding of community needs. It was essential that the champion live in the community to ensure an understanding of community needs and a familiarity with the social and political structure of the community. The role of this individual was to establish strong partnerships with community leaders such that those community leaders clearly understood the role that tennis could play in contributing to the reduction or elimination of some community problems (e.g., overweight children, delinquency) and to increasing community spirit (via community-based events). The vehicle for addressing these community contributions was the tennis pathway, through which a number of different tennis-based activities are developed. Tracking the growth of tennis in the community was a very important responsibility of the champion. This was accomplished through the recording of contact information for all new participants and the tracking of these new participants to see if they sustained their tennis activity over time. Champions were supported in their efforts by the respective provincial tennis association and Tennis Canada staff, who provided programming ideas for pathway activities, tracking-system options, assistance with the facilitation of meetings with community partners, and general guidance and support.

With respect to the four community development components that emerged from the literature, this piece of the BTC model corresponds directly with finding a community champion/catalyst and indirectly with building collaborative community partnerships and promoting sustainability, which emerged as key components in the literature. It became evident to the Tennis Canada staff and me that having a passionate, task-oriented champion who knew his or her community was essential to the successful implementation of the model. The more the selection of tennis programming reflected the needs of the community and the greater the involvement of community partners in the planning for same, the greater the likelihood that the champion, his or her partners, and tennis pathway programming would be sustained from one year to the next.

**Community Partners**

Community partners were defined as community leaders who had been identified by the community champion as people who were important to maintaining the health of tennis in the community. Community champions were encouraged to establish partnerships with education, tennis, and parks and recreation leaders as a starting point. Champions were also encouraged to consider partnerships with others in the community, such as local businesses, media, politicians, doctors, police, and so on. It was suggested that community champions, with the assistance of their provincial association contacts, host a community tennis rally (or meeting) at which community leaders are brought together to discuss the benefits that tennis brings to the community and to agree on an action plan that meets community needs. Community partners were expected to contribute to growing tennis in the community (and at the same time address community issues) by offering support through in-kind product or services, sponsorship of activities, facility access, advocacy work, and so on.

This partnership building element is grounded in the need for building collaborative community partnerships and promoting sustainability, as discussed in
the literature. Although the champions all knew that this was a required component of their job, many did not cultivate the number or type of partnerships needed to access resources and gain the full support of the community. Those champions who truly engaged their community partners in the visioning and planning process proved to be more successful in sustaining tennis activity over time.

Tennis Pathways

The tennis pathway was the “sport technical” piece of the model and consisted of four levels of activity on a continuum: try, learn, play, and compete. Each of these levels of play can be put into action through various programs and activities, depending on community needs. For example, a try activity might be a tennis demonstration area as part of a larger community event at which children and adults can come and try the game in a fun environment. A learn activity might be a series of lessons interspersed with fun opportunities to play the game. Moving participants from one level of programming to the next along the continuum is important for ensuring that participants stay involved and are individually challenged. Community champions were asked to focus their activities predominantly on the try and learn stages of the continuum, which is where most people first experience tennis and decide if they like it or not.

In the community development literature, pathway building could be equated with service delivery. According to Schuftan (1996), service delivery can be characterized as “the approach to community development that addresses actions directly related to the immediate causes of maldevelopment; it provides a usually structured set of services to defined beneficiaries” (pp. 260–261). This definition lends itself well to the attempts of the community champions to identify community needs, and then use tennis programming and activities to address some of these needs.

The BTC strategy is a nontraditional approach to increasing sport participation. The strategy is an alternative to the club-based delivery system that has been used almost exclusively by sport organizations to increase participation, often with limited success. The three core concepts developed as a framework to guide the implementation of the BTC strategy were based on the premise that sport, and in this case tennis, can help to build healthy, active communities. Inherent in this community-based delivery system is an emphasis on the development of multisector partnerships.

Characteristic of community development models is their time- and resource-intensive nature during the early years of implementation. As a consequence, this evaluation of the BTC strategy was important because it provided Tennis Canada with needed evidence-based information to make decisions about continuing or discontinuing its financial support for this unusual approach to increasing tennis participation at the community level.

Data Collection

My role was that of a participatory action researcher in that I was working “to assist critical reference groups [in this case Tennis Canada]—and those who share their perspective [in this case the provincial tennis associations and community champions] pursue their inquiries, by themselves and for themselves, as a community-of-interest” (Wadsworth, 1998, p. 13). Based on my interest in and
previous research on community development, my managerial experience in the
Canadian sport system, and my sport experiences as a volunteer and strategic-
planning consultant, I was interested in applying a community development
approach to the issue of declining sport participation in the sport of tennis.

I did not operate as an independent expert determiner of the truth but was a
facilitator of or assistant to the organization’s own pursuit of its truth/needs (Wad-
sworth, 1998). To this end, I was very immersed in the study and was in constant
communication with the national and provincial staff and the community champi-
ons for the purpose of discussing and collectively resolving problems, as well as
celebrating small successes and providing encouragement along the way.

A mixed method approach using both qualitative and quantitative methods was
employed to implement and assess the BTC strategy. In this study, Tennis Canada
needed information to understand if the BTC strategy was working to solve the
problem of declining participation. Addressing this problem involved gathering both
numeric and text information so that the final database represented both qualitative
and quantitative data. All data were collected over a 6-month period (May–October,
2002) during the second year of implementation of the BTC strategy.

Tennis Canada management and staff were involved in the definition of outcome
measures and the analysis of data. The provincial tennis association (PTA) staff
were also involved in discussions of preliminary results not only for the purposes
of gaining valuable insight into the interpretation of data but also to further educate
the staff about the model and develop greater ownership in its implementation.
Process and outcome measures were identified in collaboration with Tennis Canada
management and staff.

Process measures
- The extent to which the community champion element was understood and
  implemented
- The extent to which the community partners element was understood and
  implemented
- The extent to which the tennis pathway element was understood and imple-
  mented

Outcome measures
- Number of new participants introduced to tennis
- Number of participants moving through the tennis pathway
- Number and type of pathway programs offered
- Commitment by the community champion to continue in the position for
  another year
- Number of community tennis rallies held and type of community partners
  involved

Qualitative data were collected for the process measures using unstructured
face-to-face and telephone interviews and field-note observations, whereas quan-
titative outcome data were collected from surveys. Each data-collection method
addressed a different aspect of the BTC strategy. Specifically, the quantitative
method used (e.g., survey) provided data on outcomes and the qualitative method
(e.g., interviews and observations) provided an understanding of the process.
PTA staff members (usually the executive director) had the responsibility to select communities in their respective provinces that they felt were ready to undertake the strategy. Two major factors in assessing readiness were the existence of tennis courts in the community and whether or not the community had someone who could act as a community champion. Once the community champion was established and briefed, the staff person was expected to act in the role of facilitator to assist the champion in the implementation of the other two components of the BTC model (partnership building and pathway building) in the community. It should be noted that community was operationally defined in terms of geographic location (i.e., city, town, village). Of the 18 communities involved in the strategy, 13 were towns or cities, 2 were regions or municipalities, and 3 were sections of larger cities.

**Semistructured Interviews**

In-person or telephone interviews were conducted with the 18 community champions and the 10 provincial executive directors. Fourteen of the 18 community champions were male, and the age range of the champions was 35–75 years, with most in their 40s. Three of the champions were retired, three were tennis entrepreneurs (running their own businesses), and the remainder were local business people in their communities. Most of the champions were already volunteering with their local tennis clubs and played tennis recreationally. All lived in their communities and appeared to be well connected with other community leaders. The interview questions were open ended to allow for maximum input and flexibility. Interview sessions were approximately 1.5 hours in length and were completed over a 5-month period. It should be noted that although formal interviews were conducted, I was in regular communication (by phone or e-mail) with all of the stakeholders for the year before the evaluation period, as well as during the evaluation period.

Most of the interviews were conducted in person in the province or community of the champion, and, in most cases, the executive director of the PTA was invited and chose to be present at the interview. On some occasions, community champions brought community partners with them from their communities. This made for very dynamic interview sessions and brought a greater richness to the findings. These multiple-person interviews lasted at least 2 hours, sometimes 3. Field notes were written immediately after each interview. When the opportunity arose, field-note jottings were made during the interview as reminders to expand during the writing of field notes.

Most of the community champion interviews were held over lunch, with a view to creating a more relaxed environment for open discussion while making the individuals feel special and recognized by Tennis Canada. The positive impact that this interview setting had on the community champions resulted in an unintended outcome. Champions were proud and excited to be recognized by Tennis Canada (as well as their respective PTAs, and this inspired them to invest more time and energy in the strategy implementation after their respective interviews. Although the interview sessions were not initiated to realize this goal, I quickly recognized the impact they had in empowering these participants by providing a supportive role and enabling participants to discuss ideas and reflect on the process and goals that were set. Without doubt, these sessions were highly motivating for the
champions. Furthermore, this approach served to show that Tennis Canada was in fact actively supporting community tennis and consulting with its constituents versus sitting in its national head office. I also observed that the PTA staff who attended the interviews seemed to learn much more about community tennis from the information shared by the champions.

**Survey Method**

A survey was developed based on the common outcome measures identified in collaboration with Tennis Canada staff. At the beginning of the strategy implementation cycle, community champions were asked to set their own participation targets for each outcome measure. Each questionnaire was customized with the individual targets for each community and e-mailed to all PTA executive directors and community champions. These two parties were asked to collaborate in the completion of the survey instrument. Completed documents were then e-mailed or faxed to me. All survey questions were closed and required only a recording of numbers (e.g., programs initiated, participants involved, etc.) as a measurement of each outcome statement.

In the next section, findings related to an assessment of the three key elements used to implement the BTC strategy are reviewed. The question to be answered by this process evaluation was, After 2 years of implementation, to what extent was each of the three BTC elements implemented, resulting in a contribution to increasing the growth and sustainability of tennis? Although the three key elements are addressed independently, it should be recognized that this is for illustrative purposes and that in practice these components are interconnected and interdependent. In the second part of this section the findings related to the quantitative aspects of the study have been summarized. The question to be answered by this outcome evaluation was, After 2 years of implementation, how many new participants are now playing tennis?

**Results**

**Qualitative Process Evaluation**

**Building Community Champions.** Although Tennis Canada encouraged its provincial staff to look within and beyond the tennis club system and to identify champions who were well respected and connected in their communities, all but two champions were executive members (if not presidents) of their local tennis clubs. This situation appeared to have a number of positive and negative impacts on the implementation of the BTC strategy. On the positive side, these volunteers were well connected in their local tennis circles and passionate about the sport. It was evident through discussions that each was very committed to growing the game. On the negative side, the priorities of these champions seemed to rest with growing their club memberships rather than growing tennis in the community at large, which is the primary focus of the BTC strategy. Thus, much of the BTC strategy activity became club based (e.g., programming and activities were only offered at club facilities, not throughout the community on public courts or at schools) as
the champions attempted to juggle their club responsibilities with their community champion responsibilities.

Furthermore, this situation appeared to be compounded by some champions not clearly grasping the essence of this approach, which involves the contributions that tennis can make to address community needs. Most of the community champions continued to view tennis as an end rather than as a means and, because of this, focused too much attention on offering a wide variety of tennis programming (pathway building element) and too little time collaborating with community leaders to assess and agree how tennis programming could better address some of the needs of the community (partnership building element). Two characteristics that distinguished those champions who understood from those who did not were the working partnerships that they established with other leaders in the community and the time spent in identifying community needs before implementing tennis programming. A quote from one of these champions exemplifies this approach:

> It is really a passion of mine to make a difference in the life of children in this community and it is an amazing privilege to do it with something I enjoy. I went to deliver some transition balls to a school today and the teacher [a community partner] is starting intramural tennis at lunch next week and already has 27 kids signed up. This is from Grades 4–6, she did not approach the younger grades yet. These kids wouldn’t be exposed to this without the BTC program. I really am so excited about this program! (community champion, Ottawa, Ontario)

The strategy implementation relied heavily on the understanding and active support of the PTA staff. Some executive directors provided appropriate interventions through proactive hands-on support for their champions primarily through assisting with pathway program selection, training or selecting instructors, attending community tennis rallies, and generally motivating and encouraging the champion on a week-to-week basis through the tennis season. Others chose to limit their involvement to responding to requests for information from the champion via phone or e-mail. For those community champions who had the active support of their provincial staff contact, much more progress was made regarding the development of relationships with community leaders and the fit between tennis programming and community needs. It was evident that most of the executive directors were struggling with the focus of the strategy being “community development” versus “club development,” however, as reflected in the statement made by one executive director: “I strongly believe in the club system and am having difficulty understanding why this strategy is not focused on club development.”

**Building Community Partners.** Tennis Canada had requested, as part of its funding guidelines, that community champions develop partnerships with tennis club leaders, parks and recreation leaders, and education leaders in their communities. Partnerships with other community organizations (e.g., service clubs, youth groups, chamber of commerce, etc.) were also encouraged, based on the needs of the community. This component involved the identification of key community leaders and the staging of community tennis rallies. These rallies were really meetings at which community and tennis leaders would get together to develop common objectives.
and a joint plan of action that addressed how tennis would contribute to the health of the community and, in doing so, introduce more participants to the game. Some of the champions conducted rallies and established strong connections with other community leaders. As one community champion stated,

I am planning a community rally in the first week of May and have invited the following people: recreation department head, school board representative, tennis club representatives, and someone from health care. I thought maybe a relaxed style of meeting where attendees could offer their suggestions and we could explain what we could offer to their groups. (community champion, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia)

All champions established partnerships with tennis clubs in their communities (if they existed), and most formed a relationship with the parks and recreation director in their respective communities. The establishment of connections with parks and recreation officials, through which most tennis facilities are controlled in most communities, was a big step forward for community champions. Previously, little or no work had been done to develop partnerships between parks and recreation and tennis leaders. The community partnerships established with education and other community partners were inconsistent across communities. Although a few champions fully engaged other community leaders in the strategy planning and implementation, most did not understand the importance of establishing community partners for the purpose of addressing the sustainability objective of the BTC strategy. It became apparent through the interview process that when neither champions nor PTA executive directors fully understood the value of partnership building to the overall sustainability of the strategy, this element was poorly implemented. Some of the champions did not receive the support and encouragement that they needed to stage community tennis rallies and were not able to successfully relate to other key community leaders or fully understand community needs. The following statement from an executive director is indicative of this lack of understanding: “I don’t see the point of involving nontennis leaders. If they don’t know about tennis, how can they help us?” During the interviews it also became apparent that one part of the issue was a lack of understanding about the necessity of community leaders feeling ownership in tennis in order to sustain tennis activity in that community over time. This ownership would only be developed if these partners could clearly see how tennis was contributing to addressing some of their community or organizational needs and making the community a better place to live.

Another aspect of this lack of attention to the development of community partners by the champions and executive directors was the resistance by some of these tennis leaders to change the way that they had operated for many years. Most community sport leaders, and tennis is no exception, operate in relative isolation from (and often compete with) other organizations in the community. Community development models such as this one are based on the development of collaborative partnerships rather than competitive relationships.

Over this research period, I took every opportunity to educate both community champions and executive directors about partnership building and its centrality to ensuring sustainability for community tennis over time. As a result, by the end of the fieldwork for this research some of these tennis leaders felt that they were better equipped to tackle this responsibility. Subsequently, a number of community tennis
rallies were held in the months following the research period that brought many new partners together with tennis leaders.

With respect to the BTC strategy, the community partners identified their needs and the community champions (in some cases hypothetically) explained how tennis could assist in addressing some of these needs, resulting in win–win relationships. Shared leadership and consensus decision making were also used with success by some community champions and their partners. It is clear that this is a complex but essential component for any community development model, including the BTC strategy. The community champions and provincial staff struggled with implementing this model element partially because they did not fully understand its key purpose of ensuring sustainability and partially because the development of nontennis partnerships (for purposes other than sponsorship) was an unfamiliar activity.

Building Tennis Pathways. Most community champions mounted a number of tennis programs in their communities and experienced some success in attracting new participants. Without doubt both community champions and executive directors were most comfortable implementing the tennis pathway element of the model. Most champions focused on the implementation of try and learn activities through the local tennis clubs, parks and recreation facilities, or schools. Generally speaking, all champions made good efforts to offer programs for children and some extended programming to adults who had never played the game. Because few of the champions had established collaborative partnerships with other members of the community, many ended up doing much of the programming leg work themselves—often spending long hours on evenings and weekends at various events. Given their passion for tennis, however, few complained about this during the interviews. Many of the champions were quite creative with their pathway activities, attaching them to ongoing community events rather than staging a tennis only event that might not have attracted as many participants or contributed to the community’s agenda. For example, one community champion explained,

On Sunday, Regina began its week long Buffalo Days celebrations with “Pile of Bones” Sunday where all sorts of fun family activities are held in Wascana Park. We set up a series of mini-tennis nets on the roadway outside of the Legislative Building for passers-by to try their hand at hitting soft balls. (community champion, Regina, Saskatchewan)

Some champions cited problems with the implementation of pathway programming that might have been avoided or solved if the communication between the champion and the executive director had been better or the responsibilities were more clearly delineated for both parties. Related problems included no certified instructors in the community, not knowing which pathway programs to offer, a lack of promotional materials, and the lack of know-how to develop and distribute promotional materials. Although Tennis Canada encouraged its executive directors to assist their community champions in developing simple systems to track participants from one stage in the pathway to the next, tracking was not consistently implemented. Some champions, with the support and guidance of the provincial staff member, successfully obtained names and contact information from new participants at their try and learn activities and evaluated the number of participants
that stayed involved in tennis after their initial exposure. Most, however, did not seem to be aware that this was an important responsibility or did not know how to do the tracking.

Sport organizations have a variety of vehicles through which community representatives can participate in making decisions about services being delivered, and they offer structured sets of technical services and programs to communities that are quite often very sophisticated in their development. Often, however, delivery of programs and services to communities is done in a very isolated fashion without first establishing a relationship with that community to better understand its residents, issues, and resources, which often results in an initial growth spurt in participation that is unable to be sustained. This shotgun approach to introducing sport, including tennis, across the country has not resulted in substantial, sustained participation rates.

At the time that this research was undertaken, the BTC strategy was too young in its developmental cycle to garner substantial results (see Postscript); however, there were early indications that the strategy could provide an option to the traditional delivery of tennis programming. Table 1 summarizes the extent to which the process aspects of the model were understood and implemented. The model element of build community champions was fully implemented from the perspective that each of the 18 communities had a champion in place. The degree to which each champion was able to operationalize each of the other two model elements varied greatly. In general, all made some progress toward addressing the strategy’s growth objective by introducing new participants to the game through the building tennis pathways element. Few fully addressed the sustainability objective, however, evidenced by inconsistent tracking of new participants. The build community partners element was not well addressed, with the identification and involvement of community partners being sporadic at best. Because partnerships are central to the sustainability objective of the strategy, much more work needed to be done in this area. The tennis pathway model element was well understood and implemented in every community. In those communities in which the champion established working relationships with other community leaders, however, programming was more focused on community needs and better received.

**Table 1  Summary of Progress Against Process Measures**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Understood</th>
<th>Implemented</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Was the community champion component</td>
<td>Yes, but some aspects of role were not clear.</td>
<td>Yes, within limitations of understanding the role.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>understood and implemented?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was the community partners component</td>
<td>No, the component was not understood.</td>
<td>Some preliminary partnership building took place between tennis and parks and recreation leaders, but it was inconsistent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>understood and implemented?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was the tennis pathway component</td>
<td>Yes, the component was understood.</td>
<td>Yes, but some programming was not driven by community need.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>understood and implemented?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2  Summary of Progress Against Outcome Measures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Progress</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of new participants introduced to tennis</td>
<td>6,146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of new participants moving through tennis pathway</td>
<td>Try→Learn = 621, Learn→Play = 524</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(note: 11 of 18 communities tracked participants)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number and type of pathway programs offered</td>
<td>Try = 124, Learn = 174, Play = 89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment by community champion to continue in position</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(note: 18 community champions in total)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of community tennis rallies held (note: 35 rallies were planned)</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Quantitative Outcome Evaluation Results

The outcome measures are summarized in Table 2. It should be noted that this evaluation was based on the second year of implementation of the BTC strategy. These outcome results are modest and were considered preliminary, given the short duration of this initial phase of the BTC strategy. Nevertheless, what was deemed to be most important by me and by Tennis Canada was that these numbers indicated that, over time, this community development model, if applied consistently, could yield significant results in terms of sustained growth in tennis, resulting in more physically active communities.

Most of the community champions found a way to count the number of new participants that were exposed to tennis for the first time through the implementation of the BTC strategy. Where many had difficulty was in the tracking of those first-time players beyond their initial involvement in a try or learn activity. As a result, it was felt that little weight could be placed on the tracking numbers until tracking strategies were further developed. Many new programs were offered across the 18 communities, exceeding Tennis Canada’s expectations, testimony to the commitment of the community champions.

Keeping the same champions involved for a period of at least 3 years was deemed to be critical to the successful implementation of the strategy, and most champions did commit to continuing their work in the community. Finally, although some community tennis rallies were not held and although many did not involve the number or type of community partners that were hoped for, this partnership-building vehicle was attempted by all champions. The fact that the rallies were held at all was deemed to be a significant measure of progress.

Discussion

This study of the development, implementation, and evaluation of a community development model to enhance and sustain participation in the sport of tennis extends the community development literature in a number of important ways. First, the analysis revealed that of the three model elements, the community champion and tennis pathway elements were implemented with relative success; however, the community partners element was problematic. Partnership building was implemented in a very preliminary and incomplete manner by most community
champions. It was evident that the champions required training in the “how to” of partnership building and a more complete understanding of why working with community leaders (outside of the tennis system) was essential in order to sustain tennis programming and participation over time, as well as meet community needs. The champions, like most community sport leaders, were so accustomed to operating in relative isolation in their communities, only communicating with other tennis leaders, that what was being demanded of them was foreign and uncomfortable. The two champions that experienced the greatest success in partnership building were from the recreation and health sectors—one was a nurse and the other a recreation director. It is interesting that both of these sectors have successfully employed community development approaches for many years (Frisby & Millar, 2002; Hutchison & Nogradi, 1996; Kang, 1995; Karlis et al., 1996; Pedlar, 1996; Reid & van Dreunen, 1996; Smith et al., 2001; Stormann, 1996) and these two individuals had no problem understanding the importance of addressing community needs and bringing key community leaders into their planning processes. The current research has indeed highlighted the philosophical chasm that appears to exist between sport development in communities and community development through sport. Specifically, the models and traditions that are embedded in the sport management profession have emphasized short-term goods or services exchange partnerships or sponsorships that predominantly benefit the sport rather than longer term collaborative ventures in communities that are built on the development of common goals that will sustain themselves over time.

A second observation builds on the community development literature by considering both process and outcome components. In particular, it addresses a limitation of community development models that have tended to emphasize quantitative outcomes by showing that the qualitative aspects of process shape these quantitative outcomes and, indeed, community development. Although some researchers (Hutchison & Nogradi, 1996; Pedlar, 1996) have recognized the importance of process, there is very little empirical work that shows how community development is shaped by process. This research emphasizes the qualitative process that underpins community development by showing how the community champion, together with community partners and the tennis pathway programming, influenced the success of the community development model implemented in this study.

Third, this research builds on the work of Green (2005) and others (e.g., Boshoff, 1997; Burnett, 2001; Burnett & Hollander, 1999; Chalip & Green, 1998; Green & Chalip, 1997) who emphasize that sport managers must transform programming and provide needed social support systems for their participants or athletes to aid recruitment and retention. This study supports further transformation of the sport system, encouraging sport managers to address the diverse needs of the community through their sport programming, in this way ensuring that sport programs will be well supported and sustainable.

Overall, the findings indicate that the BTC strategy, based on a community development approach, has the potential, with time and further development, to grow and sustain community tennis participation. Although this study was limited to the sport of tennis and focused on the Canadian context, I believe that the community development model developed for tennis could be adapted for use by other sports and in other contexts. The use of community development approaches in sport is
rare, however, and the philosophical underpinnings represent a major departure from the way that traditional sport delivery systems have operated. Community development is an approach that is based on collaboration and shared decision making (Bradshaw, 2000; Frisby et al., 1997; Luke, 1998; Uhlik, 1995; Waddock & Bannister, 1991), whereas sport programming has been typically top-down and delivered locally in isolation from other community groups—most often oblivious to community needs. One of the reasons that the BTC strategy was developed as an alternative approach was because the traditional direct-delivery system through the clubs did not appear to be working, given the decreasing participation numbers across the country. How often do sport leaders ask participants or potential participants what they need before parachuting programs into communities? How long will sport leaders continue the shotgun approach to participation development? Sport leaders need to understand that the ends of building healthy communities and building healthy sport systems are not mutually exclusive and that the former will have a positive impact on the latter.

**Implications**

It is time to rethink sport delivery. Sport participation is shrinking—whether the values that underpin a country’s sport system support the need to invest in gold medals or the need to reduce the number of overweight children, alternative methods to increase and sustain sport participation need to be investigated. Many sport participation development programs have affected short-term changes in participation, but sustainability remains an issue. Sport Canada (2004) released a discussion paper titled “Investing in Sport Participation 2004–2008” that identified enhanced community-based sport programs as a priority. What this research clearly supports is the need for more grassroots sport programs that use community development approaches, enabling local leaders to identify their needs and implement solutions that both benefit the community and increase sport participation. To do this we need to involve nontraditional partners and community leaders who might not be part of the recognized sport system but who do understand community needs. This research also recognizes the importance of providing education and training in partnership building because this skill is essential to successful community development approaches.

Future research in this vein would benefit from adopting action research approaches. From a methodological perspective, I played a somewhat unique role in this predominantly qualitative research. The mix of embedded recorder and facilitator/educator added to the richness of the data collected through this study. Over the course of the data-collection period, I varied my role to accommodate the educational and facilitative needs of the key stakeholders to ensure that these tennis leaders had a role in the decision-making process used in addressing the objectives of the BTC strategy, in this way building ownership for its ongoing implementation. Being in the field fostered a learning environment for the participants, who were in constant communication with me, as well as for me, as I experienced first-hand the opportunities and challenges faced by the participants in the implementation of this community development model.
Postscript

After reviewing the findings of this study, Tennis Canada committed to the ongoing support and development of the BTC strategy. Promotional and educational materials have been produced and national and regional training workshops for community champions were designed and implemented between 2004 and 2006. Much of the focus of the training addressed community partnership building and its value. A 3-year grant totaling $280,000 was received from Sport Canada’s (Federal Government) Sport Participation Development Program. Tennis Canada has matched this support with its own resources. In 2002, when this evaluation was undertaken, the BTC strategy was in its second year of implementation and the 18 community champions introduced 6,146 new participants to the game. In 2006–07, Tennis Canada and its provincial associations have 53 communities participating in the strategy and community champions, and their partners have collectively introduced 71,920 new participants to tennis. The focus is now on the identification of new-participant retention techniques and the formation of a new delivery system comprised of community tennis associations.

References


