

1-1-2019

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Recommended Citation

Horne, Edward and Brown, Matthew (2019) "The Retention of Adult Sport Participants: The Challenge of Player Ratings," *Journal of Applied Sport Management*: Vol. 11 : Iss. 1.

<https://doi.org/10.18666/JASM-2019-V11-I1-9226>

Available at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jasm/vol11/iss1/7>

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The Retention of Adult Sport Participants

The Challenge of Player Ratings

Edward Horne

Matthew Brown

Abstract

The current study investigates the retention of competitive tennis players in the United States Tennis Association's (USTA's) adult league system to answer the following questions: What factors do participants identify as impactful to their participation in adult league tennis? How do participants believe these factors impact their retention? Results suggest participants believe the current system fails to incentivize development as competitors fail to transition successfully to a higher rating and struggle socializing into a new team. Competitors therefore seek to cheat the system. The current study illustrates the importance for league policymakers to consider unintended consequences and provides recommendations.

Keywords: *Adult sport, participation, retention, sport development, tennis*

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Introduction

National Governing Bodies (NGBs) of sport are driven by two key policy objectives: mass participation and international sporting success (De Bosscher, Shibli, Westerbeek, & van Bottenburg, 2015; Green, 2005). However, sporting success on the international stage often overshadows mass participation efforts (Green, 2004). This is because international sporting success is often the barometer used by governments for deciding how to allocate funding (Sotiriadou, Quick, & Shilbury, 2006). NGBs are therefore incentivized to prioritize elite athlete development efforts over participation initiatives. This is problematic as higher participation rates are associated with health (Booth, Roberts, & Laye, 2012), economic (Coates & Humphreys, 2003), and social benefits (Eime, Harvey, Brown, & Payne, 2010) for communities (Crompton, 2004). Additionally, higher rates of participation in their sport have an economic impact on NGBs (Coleman & Ramchandani, 2010). Therefore, although societal level issues may not be of concern to sport organizations and managers, all sport organizations should be concerned with increasing participation for economic purposes.

The emphasis on elite athlete development has also shaped how we examine participation, with efforts overwhelmingly focused on the recruitment and retention of youth participants (Anderson-Butcher, 2005; Visek et al., 2015). Adult participants, however, play a critical role in sport economies. Frequent adult participants are known to influence consumption via memberships, equipment purchases, and event spectatorships (McGehee, Yoon, & Cárdenas, 2003). Considering the strong economic impact associated with recurrent adult participants in sport, and the added expense of recruiting new adult participants compared to retaining current participants (Rosenberg & Czepiel, 1983), a greater understanding of how to retain current participants is warranted.

Studies examining sport participation show adults seek the opportunity for competition, camaraderie, and social interactions (Green & Chalip, 1998), as well as to develop and improve one's skill-set (Molanorouzi, Khoo, & Morris, 2015). While examining the individual factors known to influence adults' participation is important, it alone is insufficient. As Green (2005) argued, the experience and patterns of participants is affected by program design and implementation. For a more complete understanding of adult participation patterns, it is important to be cognizant of the impact of the design of a sports program or system. As it stands, our knowledge and understanding of how the design and delivery of sport systems affects participants is limited. The purpose of the current study then, is to examine the perceptions of current and former adult participants of an established recreational league system, to determine how system level factors impact the retention of participants.

Research Background

In order to ascertain how system level factors impact the retention of participants, the experiences of participants in the United States Tennis Association's (USTA's) adult tennis league system was examined. As an established recreational system for adult participants, it provides a strong context for analyzing how participants believe they are affected by its design and implementation.

The USTA adult tennis league is designed to facilitate good match-ups through its rating system, which ensures competitors face players of a similar ability. Player ratings are therefore the core to ensuring that players are well matched. One would expect that this would facilitate retention, as players would experience competitive challenges commensurate with their skill level. All new players wishing to participate in competitive play must assess their own ability and award themselves a rating that best represents their current level. This was deemed a more efficient system for rating players than the previous system, which required a certified teaching professional to determine a participant's initial rating. Table 1 provides an abbreviated breakdown of the USTA's (2018) suggested skill-level for each rating level, with greater guidance given on the USTA adult league webpage.

Table 1

Breakdown of the Rating Grades Used for Adult League Play

Rating	Description of recommended ability
2.5	Learning to judge where the ball is going although court coverage is weak. Can sustain a short rally of slow pace with other players of the same ability.
3.0	Fairly consistent when hitting medium-paced shots, but is not comfortable with all strokes and lacks execution when trying for directional control, depth or power. Most common doubles formation is one-up and one-back.
3.5	Has achieved improved stroke dependability with directional control on moderate shots, but still lacks depth and variety. Starting to exhibit more aggressive net play, has improved court coverage and is developing teamwork in doubles.
4.0	Has dependable strokes, including directional control and depth on forehand and backhand sides on moderate shots, plus the ability to use lobs, overheads, approach shots and volleys with some success. Occasionally forces errors when serving and teamwork in doubles is evident. Rallies may be lost due to impatience.

Table 1 (cont.)

4.5	Starting to master the use of power and spins and beginning to handle pace, has sound footwork, can control depth of shots and is beginning to vary game plan according to opponents. Can hit first serves with power and accuracy and place the second serve. Tends to overhit on difficult shots. Aggressive net play is common in doubles.
5.0	Has good shot anticipation and frequently has an outstanding shot or exceptional consistency around which a game may be structured. Can regularly hit winners or force errors off short balls and can put away volleys, can execute lobbs, drop shots, half volleys and overhead smashes and has good depth and spin on most second serves.
5.5	Has developed power and/or consistency as a major weapon. Can vary strategies and styles of play in a competitive situation and hit dependable shots in a stress situation.
6.0+	Generally do not need a rating. Rankings or past rankings speak for themselves.

Having assigned themselves a rating, players are then eligible to compete on teams of that rating level. The USTA provides assistance for players searching for teams, which are typically formed within private tennis clubs or public tennis centers (where membership is not required, but instruction is available). Teams originally compete in a local league (within the same city/town) against other teams of the same rating level. The local league champions then compete for the state championship. The winner of the state championships competes at the regional championships, with the winner progressing to the national championships.

Literature Review

In her critique of the pyramid model of sport development, Green (2005) highlighted three essential tasks sport development policies must address: athlete entrance, athlete retention, and athlete advancement. To determine how system level factors impact adults' desire to continue participating, Green's (2005) essential task of retention was used to guide the study.

According to Green (2005), retention is mediated by a participant's motivation, their socialization into the sport and subculture, and their commitment to the sport and/or organization. In being guided by Green's (2005) essential task of retention then, the current study examines how participants believe system level factors in the USTA's adult league impact their motivation, socialization, and commitment, and thus, their retention.

Being introduced to a sport does not guarantee retention. For an individual to continue participating, they must see value in participating. Values including skill

development, social interaction, fitness, and/or team affiliation (Cox, 2002). For a sport system to retain participants then, its policies must be cognizant of such values. According to Green's (2005) essential task of athlete retention, socialization also plays a key role. In the sports realm, socialization has been defined as "the process through which sports activity allows one to assimilate ways of thinking, of doing things, of talking, etc., that are common to all members and ensure their integration" (Joncheray, Level, & Richard, 2016, p. 164). Socialization is important as it bridges the gap between recruitment and commitment, Green's (2005) third contributing factor to the essential task of retention.

Commitment is important for sport managers and providers as it can be used for developing retention strategies (Gerson, 1999). According to Casper and colleagues (2007, p. 255), "in the case of the tennis industry, where retention of new players is a serious problem, economic success is dependent on the retention of existing participants who have demonstrated a commitment to the game." It is important then, for tennis managers and policymakers that we further our understanding of how system design impacts the commitment levels of participants. In their examination of adult tennis players' commitment, Casper and colleagues (2007) found participants with higher commitment levels, had greater purchase intentions. A greater understanding of what system level factors affect a participant's commitment then, can be greatly beneficial to tennis industry managers and policymakers responsible for designing programming and systems that enhance participants' commitment. While we understand the effect of higher commitment levels, we know little as to what specific factors participants believe influence their commitment levels. The need to take a deeper look into the experiences and perceptions of those participating within an existing sport system, and how the system impacts participants' motivation, socialization, and commitment is therefore warranted.

To determine how participants believe their participation is impacted by system level factors, this study therefore sought to answer the following research questions: (1) What system level factors do participants identify as impactful to their participation in adult league tennis?, and (2) How do participants believe these factors impact their retention?

Method

Participants

Purposive sampling techniques were adopted to identify participants with at least one years' experience of competing within the USTA's adult league system. A system that provides adult tennis players of all ages, genders, and ability to compete against players of similar ability. The recruitment of participants was facilitated by tennis managers at tennis clubs within the South-East region of the United States. Snowball sampling was then used to identify other participants that met the inclusion criteria. Forty participants completed in-person, semi-structured

interviews, conducted at a site of the participants choosing. Participants ranged in age from 21 to 58, with the majority of participants aged 21 to 40. The ratings level distribution of participants is shown in Figure 1.

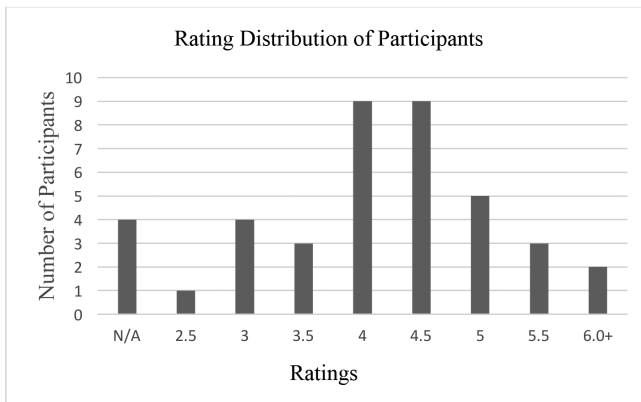


Figure 1. Rating Distribution of Interview Participants.

Interviews

Interviews lasted between 45 minutes–60 minutes, with open-ended questions developed to elicit important information regarding the participant's experience with the USTA's recreational adult league system. The interview protocol incorporated questions from Green's (2005) essential task of retention. Examples of questions asked included: "Why do you compete, or choose not to compete in the USTA league?" and "How has your experience of playing USTA league tennis affected your desire to participate?" Questions were designed to be participant driven to provide participants with the opportunity to draw from a full range of possible responses (Patton, 2002). Probing questions were used to facilitate further description of important responses, including "How does this work, in your experience?" or "Could you please describe that further?"

Data Analysis

Semi-structured interviews were conducted by researcher one. Interviews were recorded, and pseudonyms used to ensure the participants' confidentiality. Deductive reasoning was utilized via prior, thematic coding (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014), conducted using Green's (2005) essential task of retention to identify system level factors impacting participants' motivation, socialization and commitment. Data were coded into themes by the primary researcher. This process was then conducted independently by a second researcher, ensuring inter-coder reliability. Both researchers then met to validate all recognized themes and the categorization of similar themes. Any disparities were then discussed until an agreement was achieved. Analysis was complete when consensus was attained on the themes and their membership in one of the theoretical categories. This peer

debriefing reduces researcher biases (Gerdes & Conn, 2001) while enhancing the reliability of elucidation (Creswell, Hanson, Clark Plano, & Morales, 2007).

Findings

The findings shed light on the experiences of participants of the USTA adult league system. Participants identified the design of the rating system, and lack of involvement opportunities for higher-rated players as key factors impacting their participation, and therefore their retention. Although participants' experiences varied, common themes did emerge from the data, to fit Green's (2005) three essential tasks: (1) motivation, (2) socialization, and (3) commitment.

Motivation

Participants' desire to take part in the USTA's adult league system were impacted in several ways. Worryingly, the significant difference in playing ability between rating levels appeared to deter competitors from playing at a higher level. As Jane stated:

My rating was bumped up (a common term adopted by participants, describing the process of having her rating altered, and improved by the USTA's results-based monitoring system) just one rating, I barely won a match all season at my new rating so didn't bother to play again this season.

The lack of incentive to play at a higher level was echoed by Miranda: "I gave myself a rating where I knew I would get plenty of tennis and have better chances." Miranda was not alone in looking to give herself a lower rating to improve her chances of winning. As Roberto mentioned honestly, "I originally rated myself as a 4.0 as I wanted to be a ringer, after a couple of seasons my rating was bumped up to a 4.5, which is a truer reflection of my ability."

In addition to the rating system's failure to incentivize development, and prevent competitors looking to manipulate the system in their favor, participants also described the impact a change in their rating had on their social experiences. As Patty explains, "My rating was changed to a higher rating, so I had to find a new team where I only knew one lady." Therefore, as well as having to struggle with making the transition to a higher level, participants also face losing team affiliations and the social interactions they have become accustomed too.

Socialization

The cheating of the rating system appeared to be prevalent across all playing levels. Over half the participants interviewed had been involved in an appeal of a player's rating, suggesting that cheating was embedded in the league system's subculture. For instance, Peter described, "A player who was on an opposing team

supposedly hadn't played in a few years, so had given himself a 4.0 rating, he was far too good for us, so we appealed against his rating." New league players were often found to have purposefully underrated themselves, and in some cases, as Stephen explained, were told to by existing league participants, "I was told to rate myself as a 3.0 as I would have a better chance of progressing to state and maybe regionals."

Although the cheating of the system was well-known among competitors, little appeared to be done to curtail it. For example, Ashley mentioned, "As a captain of a team, I have appealed multiple players' ratings but have never won an appeal." Wesley also stated his displeasure with the lack of ramifications against players who he believed were cheating the system: "There is a need for stricter self-rated guidelines and the local league needs to visually disqualify players caught cheating by initially rating themselves significantly lower than they ought to be." Although some players admitting to being caught playing at a rating that did not reflect their ability, no respondent described being punished beyond having their rating altered. The lack of consequence appears to perpetuate the rampant cheating found in the adult league subculture.

Commitment

Commitment did not appear to be an issue among players rated at a 4.0 or below. At this level, findings suggest competitors are satisfied with their involvement opportunities. However, this was not true of higher rated players (5.0 rating level or above). Nick stated plainly, "There are no leagues for my level; to play in a team format I would go straight to regionals, where I would have to travel over five hours each way to play." Nick's thoughts were supported by Oliver, a player rated 6.0 who went further by saying

I am not playing USTA leagues right now; the only regular league tennis I could get was combo tennis, which put me with a weak partner. The USTA or local leagues need to promote semi-pro tennis, giving former college tennis players more tennis, as the tennis there is requires a lot of traveling which gets expensive.

The lack of USTA league tennis available to former college players was not only a problem for male tennis players. For example, Nicole described, "You are automatically rated a 5.0 if you played in college. I am a far cry from my college days, though, so I am not currently playing, as the women in my area are rated 4.5 or below." Chris had a similar experience, saying, "As I played for a ranked Division II school I had to self-rate as a 5.5, so I do not get regular league tennis." Findings therefore suggest that while higher rated players appear motivated to play, they face a lack of involvement opportunities.

Discussion

Players' perceptions and experiences of the USTA's recreational league system recognized several system-level factors detrimental to retention. These factors include widespread cheating, the failure to incentivize skill development, and the limited involvement opportunities for higher rated players.

Cheating within the league system is rampant. So much so that cheating appears to be an accepted norm, embedded in the system's subculture. This is worrying, as cheating is known to detract from adult tennis participants' league and social experience (Legg, Wells, Newland, & Tanner, 2017). The root cause of which is the design and implementation of the current system for rating newcomers. New entrants are able to manipulate this design flaw by awarding themselves a rating that improves their chances of winning. This also harms the socialization process, as all new entrants must self-rate. This in turn, likely hinders retention as a smooth socialization process bridges the gap between recruitment and commitment (Green, 2005).

Findings also suggest a lack of incentive for players to play at a higher level. Yet, the opportunity for skill development and mastery are known to be key motives driving adults' sport participation (Molanorouzi, Khoo, & Morris, 2015). In fact, participants often attributed their withdrawal from the league system to a forced increase in their rating. By being "bumped up," participants' chances of winning are drastically reduced, and they experienced a shift in their social world. This makes sense, as adult sport participants value the opportunity for social interaction and team affiliation (Cox, 2002). In the design of the current system then, players are motivated to stay at their current rating level, rather than aspiring to advance their rating.

Players with high ratings appeared particularly frustrated with the lack of involvement opportunities, which are important for building commitment (Casper, Gray, & Stellino, 2007). This is especially worrying, as this segment of participants have previously displayed great levels of commitment to tennis, having competed for many years in attaining their current rating, and have few involvement alternatives (Casper, Gray, & Stellino, 2007). Further, failure to accommodate, and therefore retain this segment of participants can be expected to have significant consequences for the tennis economy, as sports economies are reliant on frequent, committed participants (McGehee, Yoon, & Cardenas, 2003).

Implications

The current study contributes to our understanding of the role system-level factors play in retaining participants, reminding organizations and managers to be cognizant of the unintended consequences resulting from the design and implementation of their sport system. The system-level factors requiring attention as a result of the study include the online self-rate system, the gap between rating levels, and involvement opportunities for higher rated players.

We recommend eradicating the online self-rate system and returning to the previous method of rating participants, which required participants to be reviewed by a certified teaching professional. This will prevent participants from manipulating the system, and therefore reduce the systemic cheating found. We also recommend greater punishments for those found to cheat by awarding themselves an unreasonably low rating. Although this may harm retention efforts in the short term, this will likely benefit the system in the long term, by making cheating far less common. The current study also suggests reducing the gap between rating levels, by introducing additional rating levels. This will ease the transition for players who are “bumped up,” as well as incentivize others to develop their skill set.

Finally, we recommend providing greater involvement opportunities for high-level participants. To accomplish this, the USTA should follow the examples of other nations, such as the UK and Germany, who successfully accommodate higher-rated players in their league systems. In these systems, each tennis club or public tennis center fields teams with the club's best players, rather than matching player ratings. Therefore, teams are compiled of players with a range of ratings, and are not limited to only including players of a 5.0+ rating.

Limitations

As with all studies, there are several limitations that may have impacted the results, one being the limited scope of the sample, which included participants from just one region of the United States. It can be argued experiences may differ across regions. Further, the current system only examines the perceptions of one stakeholder. A sample including tennis administrators and managers would provide a more comprehensive investigation.

As many sport economies depend on its frequent and committed adult participants, it is important to understand how to improve their retention. Our understanding of individual factors affecting retention is strong, however, we know little regarding the impact of system level factors on retention. The current study therefore adds to our understanding of the retention of adult sport participants, by examining the root cause of retention issues, and by presenting effective retention strategies to combat the unintended consequences of an established sport system's design and implementation.

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