A Sport Leader's Attempt to Foster a Coaches' Community of Practice

Diane M. Culver, Pierre Trudel, and Penny Werthner
School of Human Kinetics, University of Ottawa,
125 University Private, Ottawa, Canada, K1N 6N5
E-mail: dculver@uottawa.ca

ABSTRACT
This case study examines a sport leader's attempt to foster a coaches' community of practice in a competitive youth baseball league. It is analysed using Wenger's [8] community of practice framework. Interviews were conducted with seven participants including the sport leader (technical director), the league manager, and five coaches. The retrospective account of time period 1 (covering four years) portrays how a visionary leader instigated changes in the sport culture to have coaches share knowledge with the common goal of developing all of the league athletes. For example, the coaches were selected for their specific expertise and were given the responsibility for the corresponding players not only on their own team but on all teams in the league. Establishing a co-operative environment in a competitive context required strong leadership and presented challenges including the alignment of all the coaches, parents, and referees. The time period 2 (covering three years), also studied retrospectively, demonstrates that the loss of the visionary leader led to the return to a more traditional, competitive environment. Finally, the time period 3 (covering one year), which was the timeframe when the research project was conducted, shows a willingness to return to the collaborative ways of time period 1, but also the challenges in making this happen without the presence of a strong, visionary leader.

Key words: Baseball, Competition, Expertise, Visionary Leadership, Youth Sport

INTRODUCTION

In line with suggestions by various sport coaching researchers [e.g., 1-4], this study was an attempt to look beyond the traditional model of large-scale education programmes in order to investigate how coaches learn through their social interactions. Based on a review of the coaching literature, Trudel and Gilbert [5] used two metaphors for learning [6] to describe the ways through which coaches learn to coach. The acquisition metaphor relates to learning resulting from teaching 'what a coach should know' and 'what a coach should do', and the

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Chris Cushion (Loughborough University, UK)

participation metaphor relates to learning that is situated in coaching practice and developed through the interactions that coaches have within their practice. In the participation metaphor, the process of learning from experience can involve an individual becoming a member of a community, learning to speak a common language, and acting according to community norms [6-8]. Lave and Wenger [7] explored this metaphor for learning in their work on apprenticeship as situated learning, concluding that apprenticeship "could be characterized – and analyzed – as legitimate peripheral participation in communities of practice" (p. 30). Using legitimate peripheral participation as the framework, they brought "together theories of situated activity and theories about the production and reproduction of the social order" (p. 47). However, Lave and Wenger clearly stated that the "concept of 'communities of practice' is left largely as an intuitive notion... which requires a more vigorous treatment" (p. 42). Wenger [8] went on to do this, noting in support of the previous quotation, that in his work with Lave "the concepts of identity and community of practice were thus important to our argument, but they were not given the spotlight and were left largely unanalyzed" (p. 11-12).

Wenger's [8] social theory of learning emphasises learning as social participation. Focusing on the reciprocal nature of the interactions between the social context and individuals, not only are meanings developed but identities are also formed as individuals interact with each other, around a practice, within a community. Wenger [8] studied insurance claims processors at work and used this research to elaborate on the concept of community of practice (CoP). He justified the name with the explanation that as human beings we interact with each other and the world, and in the pursuit of enterprises we collectively learn. In so doing, we develop practices "that reflect both the pursuit of our enterprises and the attendant social relations" (p. 45). Communities of practice are defined as: "Groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interaction on an ongoing basis" [9, p. 4]. The sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise creates a CoP. Wenger referred to mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire as "three dimensions of the relation by which practice is a source of coherence of a community" [8, p. 72]. A sport example would be the alpine ski club coaches studied by Culver [10], who negotiated together (mutual engagement) the meanings of certain technical terms (shared repertoire) to describe desired elements of ski technique as they worked together to develop young ski racers (joint enterprise). A member of a CoP develops his or her knowledge and identity through mutual engagement in a joint enterprise, as he or she negotiates meanings and develops tools around practice, and becomes accountable to other members of the community. Through this process a CoP is formed that has a shared repertoire including certain values, beliefs, ways of talking, and ways of doing things. In Wenger's words [8]:

> In a community of practice, mutual relationships, a carefully understood enterprise, and a well-honed repertoire are all investments that make sense with respect to each other. Participants have a stake in that investment because it becomes part of who they are. (p. 97)

Virtually everyone participates in a number of CoPs, although they may never have heard of the concept. Indeed Wenger commented:

> Communities of practice are an integral part of our daily lives. They are so informal and so pervasive that they rarely come into explicit focus, but for the same reasons

> they are also quite familiar. [8, p. 7]

This familiarity has likely contributed to the readiness with which many business and educational organisations have adopted, or tried to adopt, the concept for sharing knowledge. A cautionary note is advisable here as there are many interpretations of the term 'community' in regard to a group of learners. Communities of learners have been discussed in relation to learning in schools [11], on the Internet [12, 13], and in sport [14]. However, without mutual engagement in a shared enterprise and on-going interactions related to community practices, such communities do not constitute a CoP. For example, Pringle [13] described a project for elementary science teachers which used an asynchronous Internet application known as Connecting Communities of Learners. Cassidy et al. [14] presented the CoDe theory-based education program for developmental level rugby coaches, which was a series of 14 two-hour sessions that covered topics that the authors, who also delivered the program, deemed the coaches should know. In both of these examples learning may have been facilitated by interactions between participants, but the curriculum or material of teaching was clearly not chosen by the community members. Culver and Trudel [15, 16] have attempted to clarify the concept of CoPs in sport. There are also other modes of interacting such as networks of practice and informal knowledge networks that do not qualify as CoPs, but which may still contribute to knowledge acquisition and learning [17].

The purposeful development of CoPs has been actively promoted in, for example, the military [18], education [19], and business [9, 20]. In sport, it has been noted that CoPs are rarely present because the competitive nature of sport serves as a constraint to coaches sharing their knowledge [21-23]. For this reason a facilitator or coordinator is perhaps even more important in a coaches' CoP than in some other contexts [17, 21, 22]. The literature is clear that facilitators are important not just in the early stages of community development, but also in order to sustain the momentum through the natural changes in practice, members and so on [20].

As our research group was investigating how coaches might learn through their participation in CoPs, a colleague approached us following our presentation on this topic at a conference to inform us that he knew of a concrete example in which one individual had tried to implement changes in a very competitive league in order to have the coaches share their knowledge. The possibility of analysing an attempt made not by a researcher, but by a sport leader to foster coaches' collaboration and knowledge sharing, something that appeared to be uncommon at the time, was appealing. However, we needed to confirm that the initiative was significant enough to engender important changes. Our colleague shared with us a recording of a sports news television show in which the league and its technical director were featured [24]. Although no longer in the position of technical director (hereafter TD), we were able to contact the sport leader to conduct a first interview in which he briefly shared his experiences. With this, we were convinced that conducting a case study of this league would be a worthwhile endeavour in terms of exploring a different situation in which coaches might learn.

Donmoyer [25] suggested that practitioners in applied fields such as education, of which we consider coaching to be an extension, can benefit from the single-case study in that this type of research can serve as a heuristic. Being more concerned with individuals than aggregates, practitioners can make use of case study research "to expand and enrich the repertoire of social constructions available" (p. 51-52). Donmoyer believed that case studies are generalizable through the vicarious experiences they afford readers:

> Case studies allow us to experience vicariously, unique situations and unique individuals… They can help us overcome the problem caused by the fact that (1) many [practitioners] learn best by modelling, but (2) there are often not enough truly exceptional models to go around. (p. 62)

Stake [26] differentiates between intrinsic and instrumental case studies. The former is examined because we have an interest in understanding the particular case; the latter in order to gain understanding of some phenomenon other than the particular case. This research project is an intrinsic case study, studied "not… because it illustrates a particular trait or problem, but instead because, in all its particularity *and* ordinariness, this case itself is of interest" (p. 445, italics in original). Indeed, the uniqueness of the league was the reason it was featured on the television show and referred to as "exceptional… radical…and brilliant". Taking into consideration the components of a CoP as defined by Wenger [8], the purpose of this study was to examine how changes brought about by a sport leader altered the manner in which a competitive baseball league operated, including how the coaches interacted and shared knowledge. The research questions were: How did the coaches and administrators of the Midget AAA league describe the league under the TD's leadership? In what ways did the league change over the years after the leader's departure?

METHOD

THE CASE

The Midget AAA baseball league, which is the focus of this study, along with its evolution, rules and procedures, coaches, manager/coordinator, and technical director compose the particular case. The mission statement of this Midget AAA development league is "to provide all the necessary tools possible to permit our talented players to go as far as possible in the baseball world" (webpage of the league on the Provincial Baseball Organisation's Website[1]). The league brings together the best 15, 16, and 17 year-old boys in the province and forms them into teams (between six and nine teams, depending on the year) across the province. Generally speaking, throughout North America in both school and community sport, AAA is the classification given to the most competitive teams in a league or age group. The authority that operates the league is the provincial sport organisation, which is a sub-body of the national (Canadian) sport organisation, and a member of the provincial multi-sport body that coordinates all the sport organisations in the province. The coaches of this league do not receive a salary but do receive an honorarium, which at the time of study was between $2,000 and $2,500 depending on their experience and certification. Each team had a coach and an assistant coach.

Three time periods of the league history will be referred to; the first two were studied retrospectively: time period (TP) 1, the four-year period during which the programme was directed by the TD (Andy) and during which the sports news clip was filmed; TP 2, the three-year period immediately following the departure of Andy; and TP 3, the season during which the study was conducted. It is to be noted that this Midget AAA league was in place prior to the TP 1, operating as a typical competitive league, with no formal structure to nurture the interactions between the coaches.

[1]For the sake of anonymity, the reference is not provided.

THE PARTICIPANTS

As per the requirements for all research related to humans, this project was approved by the researchers' university research ethics board. All the names of people and places are pseudonyms so as to ensure anonymity. In qualitative casework: "What details of life the researchers are unable to see for themselves is obtained by interviewing people who did see them or by finding documents recording them" [27, p. 453]. After viewing the archived documentary sport news clip that had been made for television, and interviewing the TD who was featured, our purposive sample was selected using a referral approach to group key people who were present across the three time periods and who fulfilled a number of different roles. For example, in TP 1 and TP 2 Adam was a coach and became a supervisor in TP 3; and Rick, in the role of league manager in TP 1, acted as an administrative assistant to the TD. In TP 3 he was brought back as the league coordinator to try and reinstate some of the structure that Andy had put in place during TP 1. An attempt was made to gather data from different actors including coaches, supervisors, and administrators who were capable of providing a view of the whole period [26]. Table 1 presents the seven participants in this study and their respective roles during each of the three time periods.

Table 1. Participants and Their Respective Roles during the Three Time Periods Studied

Participant Pseudonym	Time Period 1 (4 seasons) Retrospective Role	Time Period 2 (3 seasons) Retrospective Role	Time Period 3 (1 season) Real time Role
Andy	Technical director	Not with league	Not with league
Rick	League manager	Not with league	League coordinator
Sam	Player (junior elite)	Assistant coach, Coach	Technical director
Henry	Coach[2]	Coach	Coach
Philip	Coach	Coach, TD, Coach	Coach
Adam	Coach	Coach, Coach (junior elite)	Supervisor
Peter	Coach	Coach, Supervisor	Supervisor

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

During TP 3, each participant was interviewed initially for between 60 and 90 minutes. The league manager/coordinator (Rick) and the original TD (Andy) were contacted a number of times for follow-up questions. The interview guide included open-ended questions formulated to get at the participants' experiences in the league both under Andy's leadership and during the seasons after he left the league. The interview questions were guided by our viewing of the sports news clip and by our conceptual framework. Further data were collected when the principal researcher observed a mid-season league tournament and attended a coaches' meeting during TP 3. The purpose of these observations was to scrutinize the nature of the coaches' discussions during their meeting and their interactions during the tournament games. This researcher's experience as an international coach and facilitator/researcher of coaches' learning and CoPs, allowed her to access "what is perceived to be the case's own issues, contexts, and interpretations, its 'thick description' " [27, p. 450]. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and the content analysed by two of the researchers.

[2]Unless otherwise indicated, 'coach' means coach in the Midget AAA league.

The thematic analysis [28] was largely theory driven. The researchers' analytic interest in coaches' CoPs and the research questions framed the coding process. The analysis of the interviews and the principle researcher's observations sought to delineate the actions taken by Andy and the perceptions of the other participants concerning these actions, and how the league evolved after Andy left. According to the general steps for thematic analysis, the researchers familiarised themselves with the data, generated initial codes, searched for themes which were then reviewed and defined, and finally selected data extracts for the report. All interviews were sent to the respective participants for review, and the final report was read by Andy, Rick, and one coach, who declared that the report represents the reality of the league during the time periods studied.

RESULTS

The findings will be presented according to the three time periods of the programme studied.

TIME PERIOD 1: ANDY LEADS THE LEAGUE IN A NEW DIRECTION

In this section, we will present the TD's initiative to implement major changes to the competitive youth baseball league; changes that put the development of its players before competition. The data speak of the type of leadership that manifested the changes to the culture of the league, and the structural amendments that supported this change.

A Leader with a Vision of a New Enterprise

The leader whose vision led to the substantial changes in the league for the sake of player and coach development was Andy, who held the position of the TD for four years in TP 1, during which time he initiated collaboration among the coaches of all teams. Andy's experience prior to being appointed the TD of the league included being a winning coach in the same Midget AAA league (three seasons) and in the junior elite league (next older age group) of the same provincial baseball organisation, for one season. Andy had also coached in the Canadian university league.

Andy reported that as a young coach he had felt frustrated that there was no structure for coaches to share knowledge for developing athletes, so when he became the TD he brought his own vision and philosophy to the job. Andy's philosophy put player development, as opposed to competition, at the forefront of the programme. He explained:

> *"I said to myself that if we could increase the sharing of the coaches' knowledge to benefit the whole group of athletes…. it could be good for everyone involved.... I accentuated a bunch of things so that we truly had a developmental structure, which was completely the opposite of what ice hockey was doing, for example."*

There was a clear consensus among those interviewed that Andy's leadership had been very strong. Interestingly, although the objective of the programme was to get the coaches to work cooperatively for the benefit of development, this was accomplished by firm, direct leadership. One participant described Andy's leadership style, "*Andy led with an iron fist and the programme worked very, very well. He was very demanding when it came to the development of the players*…. (Rick)". This was supported by three coaches who remarked, "*In Andy's time, it was very, very, strict, and I think that this was good" (Philip); and "it was by the book… one way of doing things for all the players, all the teams, all the coaches"* (Henry); and finally:

> *"[With] Andy, it was one way… I would say dictator, but not a dictator… he would not break your arms if you didn't do what he said; it is just that he really, really believed in consistent teaching… For him, the first practice of the training camp for the Midget AAA team in Littleton should be the same practice that was taking place in Smithfield*[3]*."* (Adam)

Concerning his own view of his leadership, Andy said it was necessary to be very directive and tough, employing a "this is *the way* it works" approach. For example, if a coach who was a pitching expert was asked to share his knowledge with the coaches and players of another team, and he did not wish to do so, Andy's direct leadership prevailed. In such a situation, he reported saying to the coach, "*You were engaged to share your expertise with everyone*". From both Andy's and the coaches' perspectives, Andy led everything from selecting the athletes and coaches to mandating the practice plans. Two coaches were chosen per team and all the coaches agreed to follow the new guidelines set out by Andy (adhere to league regulations, and attend the camp and other meetings) in exchange for an honorarium. As well, Andy did all the supervising: "*Andy was all alone… at least in my case I never had any feedback from anyone apart from him*" (Adam). Adam noted that Andy had the ability to do this because he had credibility. He had successfully coached in the league.

Andy spoke of a number of challenges when he first introduced his philosophy and the subsequent initiatives. In a context where competition and winning are traditionally very important to most coaches, players, and parents, it was necessary to re-educate the community, the athletes and coaches, as well as the officials, about the new approach. Coaches, who often feel their coaching knowledge is their own private reserve and who tend to keep what works for them very secret, needed to be convinced to share their knowledge. Andy described how the first year was the most difficult. Nearly all of the coaches had been coaching in the league prior to the implementation of this new version of the programme and that meant that some of their well-established methods of coaching had to be challenged. But Andy ensured that his philosophy was not just something on paper. He followed up and made certain that the coaches were supported in their practices and eventually their games. In fact, Andy remarked that once the coaches became accustomed to the sharing, they really enjoyed it. The following comment by Andy is indicative of this.

> *"There is a vertical structure in baseball and you go from Midget AAA to major junior, like in hockey. So, most of our coaches had success, they were liked by their players, and they were called upon to coach at the major junior level. Of course it is a normal part of their development. And I knew it, after 3 or 4 months they were unhappy, they wanted to come back... because they liked the camaraderie between the coaches, which you do not see at the junior level where you have to win. You are paid to win and if you do not win you are replaced by another. In Midget AAA, we never laid off a coach because of his win/loss record."*

The reactions of the parents the first season were predictable. When they came to see a game and saw the coach of their son's team stop the game and begin to coach one of the opposing players, they asked,

[3]Fictitious names are used for the cities.

> *"What sort of baseball game is this? What is the coach doing on the diamond? Why did he stop the game and have the sequence replayed?" It was too much for them. They had never seen baseball played like that.* (Andy).

Subsequently, pre-season meetings were held with the parents to explain the philosophy, goals, and methods of the programme. When the parents understood the rationale behind the programme and began to see their sons learning new skills and becoming more competent, they started to be convinced that it was good for the players' development.

Operationalizing the New Vision

In this section of the findings, we present four of the major changes that Andy made to the operations of the league. These changes related to: coach selection, shared practices, coaches' collaboration, and rules. To begin, as previously indicated, Andy selected who would be part of the CoP for the new enterprise by choosing all the coaches. Specialty coaches were selected because of their knowledge related to specific positions. They were told that they would be in charge of the corresponding coaches and athletes of all the teams.

A part of the shared repertoire was realized through the sharing of identical practice sessions. The typical season for the Midget AAA players and coaches began early in the winter months with each team having practice sessions in a local gymnasium (the winter weather making it impossible to play outdoors at this time of year). All the coaches were given the identical practice plans for these sessions. When they agreed to coach in the league, the coaches were informed that they would be receiving practice plans for the 12 sessions in the gym, and that they were expected to follow them. Andy travelled the province during this time to check on these practices.

To promote coaches' collaboration following these indoor sessions, there was a spring training camp in Florida during which the sharing of coaching knowledge and responsibility really began. A coach remarked, "*The camp is important for the players and important for the forming of the coaches too; there are so many meetings in that week that we learn a lot, and there is so much coach training*" (Philip). There were specific clinics for the coaches of each position such as first base, third base, pitching, catching, and so on. These clinics, in which the coaches shared knowledge and techniques, were led by the selected 'head' specialty coach for each position. At the end of each day there was a debriefing session, facilitated by Andy, with all the coaches. Once the teams returned from Florida, Andy continued to promote the coaches' collaborative engagement by organizing opportunities for the sharing between the coaches to continue. The coaches were required to attend coach meetings and outings, such as coaching conferences or attending professional baseball games. Andy explained that the coaches were told of these events at the time of their agreeing to coach in the league, and he made certain that the events would be interesting. He told the coaches, "*I am telling you in advance that you must come to the professional baseball stadium for such and such a day in June*". He said, "*It was fun because I took advantage of this time to have my coaches meet the manager of the Major League team… I would say to them in advance 'Prepare your questions; we will have one hour with him'* ". During these events, the sharing continued between the coaches with opportunities for them to negotiate various technical points.

The shared repertoire and joint enterprise of developing players would not have been sustained without changes to the rules. For example, strict rules controlled the volume and nature of the practices and games. Every player had to play a certain minimum number of

innings and there were no offensive substitutions permitted, only strategic ones. The number of pitches per pitcher was also controlled. Any coach could ask the referee to stop a game to replay a certain sequence and use the opportunity as a teaching moment. All teams had two practices and two double-header games (seven innings per game) per week, with a practice before each game as well as the stops in the games to practice certain plays. Other rules were implemented specifically to ensure that player development remained the focus. For example the 20-second rule, enforced by the umpire using a stopwatch, stated that from the moment the umpire called the third out of an inning the two teams had 20 seconds to get into their positions for the following inning. This meant a full seven inning game could be played in less than two hours, making it more fun and more action filled for players; both important features to keep the young players interested in the sport. Furthermore, there was no overall league winner, taking the focus off winning in the games. Instead there was an end-of-season tournament for all teams during which players were selected for a team to compete at the Canadian Championships. All of these procedures resulted in the coaches learning a new way to approach their coaching practice; a way that supported the new enterprise of developing every athlete.

TIME PERIOD 2: THE YEARS IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING THE DEPARTURE OF ANDY

During the three-year time period following Andy's departure, the TD's position changed three times. Given this fact, it is not surprising that lack of direction was an issue. According to Rick who had been the manager during TP 1, the league gradually reverted to the enterprise it had been before Andy's leadership: "*The feedback that I got when he left was that the league lost the player development focus and it became much more competitive*". The coaches' mutual engagement also lapsed, one coach noting that the first years after Andy left were the worst, with each coach operating according to his individual philosophy. Sam, who coached in this time period, said the sharing only took place during the Florida camp and that once the season began "*either they [the coaches] are reluctant, or they have enough to do with their own team, or they want to win*". Another view of the shift away from the mutual engagement seen in TP 1 was provided by Philip, who was the TD for a short while during this time period. He said, "*I tried to put more confidence in the coaches…. With the high-performance director (of the provincial sport organization), we modified some of the regulations to give a little more latitude to the coaches*". Other regulations were still in place but not used consistently, such as the opportunity for a coach to stop the games for a teachable moment. According to Sam, the philosophy previously developed by Andy was not made explicit, resulting in some of the players feeling humiliated when a coach stopped a game to go over a specific play.

A shared repertoire also seemed to be lacking. Sam said that the workbook of practice plans for the 12 indoor winter sessions had fallen out of use and had not been updated since Andy had initially developed it. This lack of a shared tool affected the coaching practice, making collaborative coaching more difficult. When asked if the coaches coached the players on other teams, Sam said:

> *"Not as much… the reason being the coaches do not want to contradict the team coach…. [with] the progression of the different teams not being uniform, the level of player advancement is not the same. So we could talk of one thing to a player but the player has not yet seen it with their coach. That is a problem."*

Looking back over the three years of TP 2, with Andy gone as the TD and three other individuals rotated through the position, the participants said that without Andy's vision and philosophy of player development, and the 'iron fist' of his leadership, there was much less discipline and uniformity of purpose for the coaches and players.

TIME PERIOD 3: THE SEASON DURING WHICH THE STUDY WAS CONDUCTED

Time period 3 was marked by certain steps to try and bring the league back to how it had been under Andy. The participants during this time period seemed to be engaged in new negotiations concerning the meaning of player development as a philosophy underlying their practice. However, these negotiations occurred without the benefit of the mutual engagement nurtured by Andy. A supervisor remarked: "*It has changed in the sense that it has become less good… because Andy had coached in the league*" (Adam); this last comment highlighting that those who followed Andy in the league leadership roles did not have the same competencies as Andy.

Rick, who managed under Andy, was hired to coordinate the league and four supervisors were engaged to travel between the teams to supervise the coaching, and to observe practices and games on a very regular basis. One of the supervisors said that Rick was a good administrative person and that this was a complement to the technical expertise of the supervisors. Coach Henry confirmed that Rick had tried to bring back the focus on development; and he felt the presence of the four supervisors (for six coaches) was really improving his coaching abilities. Another coach recognized: "*If we train the coaches well, the players will be better…. There is a lot of feedback… As much as possible I try to be open to comments*" (Philip).

Nonetheless, in examining the current situation, the negotiations surrounding the meaning of player development seemed to include more autonomy for the coaches. A supervisor explained that while the philosophy was still player development, "*The big difference between Andy's time and now, is the manner in which the philosophy is applied*" (Adam). The following comment by the same supervisor highlights a more individualistic versus collaborative process:

> *"This year, we have quite strict guidelines [but] as a supervisor I still leave quite a bit of latitude to the coaches. I find that we cannot necessarily forge the personality of the coach. Even myself, when I was coaching, I liked to teach things that the other coaches did not… maybe because [I believed] I knew more…."* (Adam)

In support of this, a coach said, "*Now the teams can do things differently, they are freer in their decisions*" (Henry).

Other data point to the lack of a coaches' CoP. For example, the interactions between the coaches and the supervisors were sometimes problematic. One coach and two administrators mentioned that some of the coaches were not receptive to the supervisors' feedback. Related to the coaches, Rick noted that the most important thing "*is the coaches' openness to critique*", and Sam said "*some coaches like it [being critiqued], and some don't*". On this note, Rick felt that the coaches needed more maturity and less competitiveness. But, he said: "*Competitiveness is always there; you cannot take the competitiveness out of the coach! Never in this life! …. The coaches with the most experience … are capable of being competitive and have the ability to work on development too*". Other comments related to the

supervisors, such as the coach who said that he felt incompetent sometimes after a supervisor intervened. Rick indicated that sometimes the supervisors were at fault. For example, he said, "*Sometimes you [as a supervisor] have to ask questions before you correct [a coach] … just looking at what happens on the field might not tell you the whole story*". These types of obstacles again reflect the lack of mutual engagement and a well-understood joint enterprise.

A concrete example of the negotiations around the meaning of player development as a philosophy underlying their practice surfaced at the coaches' meeting attended by the lead researcher during the mid-season tournament. There was an extended discussion concerning the use of signals, which in baseball are used for communicating tactics and strategies in a manner not readily comprehensible to the opposing team. It was noted that some coaches were using individual team signals. Other coaches argued that the use of signals specific to one team went against the principle of athlete development. Agreeing, one supervisor asked how a coach could be watching the play of the athletes if he was watching for the signals of the rival team. Another supervisor, who had been a coach during TP 1, remarked in his interview that there should be one signal system for all teams. That way, he said, the team who won the game would do so based solely on the quality of the athletes' play, reflecting both the athletes' abilities and the quality of the coaching. Diametrically opposed to this approach, the use of secretive signals to gain advantage over the rival team is a clearly competitive tactic that does not place athlete development at the fore. The league coaches during this time period lacked a joint enterprise.

Other statements supported the lack of joint enterprise and shared repertoire when it came to regulations. For example, Peter wanted to see the return of more specific direction for player development such as regulations regarding how many pitches the pitchers of each age, 15, 16, and 17 years-old, should pitch in each month of the season. Also, Sam indicated that although there were still regulations as per the number of innings a player had to play, exceptions were now made. Regarding the coaches' ability to stop the games to replay a certain play, Rick said that the possibility was there but that no coaches did it in TP 3.

Another obstacle raised by the coaches was 'time'; mutual engagement not being a clear priority for the coaches in TP 3. There was a sense that the coaches were already being asked to give a lot of time to what is basically a volunteer job. Sam remarked: "*It is nine to five Saturday and Sunday, plus one to two practices a week, and sometimes a game during the week; it takes a lot of time*". Sam also said that the coaches complained they did not have time to go to meetings. However, both Rick and Peter confirmed the meetings ensured adequate interaction and coordination:

> *"I think you have got to have at least three meetings a year, one before the season starts, one at this meeting right here in the middle of the season, and obviously at the end of the year, to recap … what we want to do is build on whatever we did this year but I think next year, we [have] got to put in some straight guidelines and apply them to the rule." (Peter)*

Rick noted that without these meetings the collegiality established at the Florida camp slipped away and the interactions became one-on-one (as indicated by the coach-supervisor communication comments above). The above data concerning TP 3 seem full of excuses as to why, even though there was an expectation of returning to the focus on player development compared to TP 2, there was no coaches' CoP.

An overview of the findings of the three time periods of the Midget AAA baseball league indicate that with Andy's leadership the league was able to develop a unique focus on player and

coach development while still being competitive. The team that represented the league at the Canadian Championships, even though it was on average younger than the other teams, did very well. His vision, organisation, and credibility as a coach helped him implement the initiative, in which he clearly mapped out the joint enterprise and ensured that there were opportunities for mutual engagement and negotiating meanings around a shared repertoire. The relatively small size of the league (six to nine teams) allowed him to regularly check on all the teams. He acted as coordinator and supervisor for the league. Without that leadership in TP 2, the league quickly fell back into the more traditional way of running a competitive baseball league, with the coaches of each team having more autonomy. The league struggled to find a TD who could take charge, going through three TDs during this period. In TP 3 an attempt was being made to bring back some of the focus on player development although the philosophy behind this was not made explicit. The coaches, administrators, and supervisors had difficulty developing a practice that truly put player development before competition. Rick, who had been the league manager under Andy in TP 1, was brought in as the league coordinator to bring the coaches together. While he was seen as a good administrator, his lack of technical credibility meant that four supervisors were engaged to oversee the technical aspects of the coaching. This was viewed positively by the coaches interviewed, but it was clear that the components of a coaches' CoP that were present in TP 1, under Andy, were not present in TP 3.

DISCUSSION

This study examined a sport leader's attempt to foster a coaches' CoP. The following discussion relates the findings to leadership in CoP; and, using Wenger's [8] conception of learning, the manner in which the sport leader's initiatives altered the way the coaches might learn. We end this section with some of the possible contributions of this study.

THE IMPORTANCE OF STRONG LEADERSHIP

Saint-Onge and Wallace [20], on the subject of leveraging CoPs for strategic advantage, described three types of CoP: i) informal, loosely organized, grass-roots structures; ii) supported, with some degree of organizational sponsorship and more clearly focused on developing new knowledge; and iii) structured, "highly motivated, aligned with strategic imperatives that significantly contribute to an organization's performance" (p. 38). The Midget AAA baseball league in TP 1, with Andy as the TD, was an example of the third type, being highly structured and focused on performance as defined by the provincial baseball organisations's mission statement quoted above. Again according to the Saint-Onge and Wallace [20] typology, within a structured CoP, membership is by invitation according to selection criteria; this was the case in TP 1. Moreover, in line with a structured CoP, it was evident in the coaches' words that the mandate of the CoP was defined by the instigator (Andy) and endorsed by the members (the coaches).

Leadership has been defined as: "A process used by an individual to influence group members toward the achievement of group goals in which the group members view the influence as legitimate" [29, p. 4]. In this case, Andy systematically implemented a series of actions that influenced the behaviours of coaches, athletes, and referees. He used his influence to pursue the goal of developing the athletes and the coaches, and his influence was accepted as reasonable and justifiable [29]. Leadership and organisational support are important elements for nurturing CoPs [9, 17] and for continuing community success [20].

The facilitator of a group focused on learning should help group members learn together by creating structure, data, time, and tools while instilling a desire to learn and promoting learning as a life-long process [30]. Trudel and Gilbert [21], writing about changing youth

ice hockey to offer a safer, fair-play environment, suggested that the facilitators of CoPs should be carefully selected and should be both respected and knowledgeable, being "able to inspire a new view of ice hockey" (p. 176). Andy in TP 1 of this study certainly fit this description. He had the knowledge and respect of the others, and he clearly espoused a new vision of baseball at the developmental level; something that was publicly acknowledged by the television show.

It has been recognized that the role of facilitators of such learning groups normally moves from more directing to less directing as the group members embrace the process [31, 32]. In TP 1, Andy was instigating major change and was very directive. However, in TP 2, he was no longer present and no one else had been prepared, or was ready, to assume the role of leader. Those who did take on the role of TD either did not have the same vision, or they lacked credibility; or perhaps they lacked both of these things. The coaches' CoP fell apart in TP 2. The fact that the culture slipped back to a more competitive (versus developmental) focus indicates that continued direction and leadership would have been necessary in order to truly have the group embrace the 'new culture'. Indeed, according to Wenger et al. [9] "the most important factor in a community's success is the vitality of its leadership" (p. 80). Add to this the fluid nature of many coaching employment situations, and the competitive nature of sport, and it seems likely that a relatively strong leader would be needed at most times. Culver [10] found the lack of leadership was a key factor in the failure to establish a healthy coaches' CoP with two different groups of coaches in two diverse sport cultures.

It could be argued that the degree of control and structure exercised by Andy left little room for the negotiation of meaning; an integral part of any CoP. But, as Wenger has stated: "Participation (in the practice of a CoP) is never simply the realization of a description or a prescription" [8, p. 68]. Whenever something is made explicit by sharing within a CoP, it is transformed by its understanding and use in the new context. But the balance between prescription and negotiation is delicate and it seems likely that situations requiring substantial change will, at least initially, demand a greater degree of prescriptive measures aimed at changing the culture. Speaking in reference to CoPs and knowledge management in corporations, Bond [33] noted that while "a notional balance between organisational energy and order... is deemed to be the optimal state for achieving CoP effectiveness", the benefits of 'directed' leadership can be considerable. For Bond, CoPs emerging from less structured situations will need more structure, in order for change to take place. Andy's leadership is echoed in the following words of Wenger et al: [9]:

> The foundation of leadership has always been about learning…. It has been about passionately setting out a vision and putting together a sound strategy to support it; about developing people to take initiative and follow their bliss, while also reinforcing their commitment to performance objectives and holding them accountable. [9, p. 216]

The next section looks at Andy's actions in relation to Wenger's [8] conception of learning through mutual engagement in a joint enterprise.

COMPONENTS AND DIMENSIONS OF THE CoP

Wenger [8] detailed three dimensions of the association of practice to community: mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire. Without being aware of a CoP framework, in TP 1 Andy implemented an initiative in which the Midget AAA league coaches were mutually engaged in the joint enterprise of developing all the young athletes in

the league. In this case study, the athletes, coaches, supervisors, TD, parents and officials were all part of the social context, but they were not all part of the same CoP. Wenger is clear that CoPs are not just work groups, teams, organizations, or other social categories: "A community of practice is not defined merely by who knows whom or who talks with whom in a network of interpersonal relations through which information flows" (p.74). Bond [33] suggests that along with the wide acceptance of CoPs in the knowledge management sector "has come a proliferation of community types, such as, communities of interest, virtual communities, and distributed communities of practice, all of which, it could be argued, have diluted and even distorted the original concept". Members of a CoP must interact on an on-going basis, negotiating meanings (learning) as they engage in and become competent in their practice [8, 16, 17].

In order for player development to be the central and common goal of the league, a cooperative environment was created in TP 1, which aimed to have the coaches share their experiences and the responsibility of developing all the players in the league, not just their own. This is significant because traditional coach education programmes have tended to educate individual coaches, and send them off to practice in a milieu more competitive than collaborative. Such competitiveness is also evident in other domains such as business, where, for instance, Duguid [34] talks about this voluntary desire of people in competitive settings to not want to share as the ethical entailment of practice, versus the epistemic entailment which involves involuntary barriers to sharing. Rather than "the 'can/can't' of knowledge flow [the ethical entailment refers to] the 'will/won't'" (p. 113) of knowledge flow and contributes to knowledge being 'sticky' or less likely to be shared [35, 36]. TP 2 saw the demise of the coaches' CoP and even in TP 3, although attempts were being made to bring back more knowledge sharing, the data provide evidence of the complexities involved in truly creating a collaborative culture where a competitive one is historically pre-dominant.

Andy's control over the hiring of all the coaches in the league allowed for the attainment of the coaches' initial buy-in, since they had to agree to participate in the prescribed activities, according to the role assigned to them or they were not signed on to coach. This generated the mutual engagement of the coaches. The findings show that Andy, as the leader of this philosophical shift, had the respect of the coaches, a fact that was certainly initially crucial for their active engagement in the joint enterprise [9, 20]. The shared repertoire (the practice plans for the winter indoor sessions and the rules and procedures laid out for the league) provided a basis for the coaches' understanding of what it meant to be a coach in the Midget AAA league led by Andy. The coaches' endorsement of Andy's initiatives also points to how, within the coaches' CoP, the coaches' learning could change their identities.

Wenger points out that:

> …aligning our efforts with the styles and discourses of certain institutions, movements, or systems of thought can be a very profound aspect of how we define ourselves…. Because alignment involves power, it often combines allegiance and compliance. [8, p. 196]

Given that, in Wenger's social theory of learning, knowledge is a matter of competence with respect to valued enterprises [8], and that the joint enterprise of the league was the development of all the athletes, the competencies demanded of the coaches changed from the knowledge and strategies they might teach their athletes so that their team beat the other teams, to teaching the athletes of all the teams and sharing their personal knowledge through collaboration with the other coaches.

The question of identity (who are we becoming?) is a component of Wenger's social theory of learning [8]. Indeed identities are formed in CoPs as learning occurs and practices change: "Our enterprises and our definition of competence shape our identities through our very engagement in activities and social interactions" [8, p. 193]. In this case, the baseball coaches in TP 1 learned to share with the other coaches and to take responsibility for coaching players from other teams. No longer were they to identify primarily as the coach of the Xville team; instead they were the pitching coach of all the Midget AAA pitchers, for instance. Andy asked the coaches to learn a new approach to athlete development; one that was based on the appropriate development of 15, 16, and 17 year-old players, rather than on a professional baseball model in which competition takes precedence over training and development.

The development of elite athletes falls into the domain of performance sport, which is highly competitive, and in which coaches (and athletes) are rewarded by outcome success [37]. Owen-Pugh critiqued Lave and Wenger's model, stating that a limitation is its failure to "theorize assessment-driven learning, in which individuals may compete with one another, not only for monetary reward but also for self-fulfillment" [37, p. 93]. It is true that this is a world in which coaches are often reluctant to share the secrets of their success with their opponents [21] unless specific opportunities for sharing are made available, such as clinics or mentoring programmes [39]; and unless the sub-culture is appropriate; for example, not using coaches' win-loss records as the assessment of their success. The league as depicted in TP 1 serves as an exceptional representation for others involved in the development of youth sport. We do not know of any other competitive sport leagues where the structure has been so clearly focused on player development that it has brought about the types of modifications to league rules and coaching that are reported herein. In reference to the Donmoyer [25] quotation in the methods section of this paper, researchers have reported that indeed coaches do learn from modelling themselves after other coaches [22, 40, 41], thus perhaps this study can serve as a model for other elite youth-sport settings.

Culver and Trudel [17] argued that within the sport social learning system, which moves from local to global (team or club, league, national, and international sport structures), coaches' CoPs are most likely to occur at the level of the team or club, with few interactions occurring between the different coaches of a league. Indeed these authors commented:

> Based on certain researchers' analyses of the coaching field and on some of our studies on coaches' learning through interactions we will argue that, in the actual sport culture, it is almost impossible to find a coaches' CoP outside of a team or a club. [17 p. 100]

The continuing truth of this statement heightens the intrinsic value of this case study, making TP 1 an exception to this fact. TPs 2 and 3 support the literature in that the coaches' CoP dissolved without the vision and strong leadership of one person, Andy. Compounding the lack of a clear vision and strong leadership, without a well-defined enterprise that is engaged in for a sufficiently long time to have the practices become routine and part of the subculture, a coaches' CoP will not be sustainable.

CONCLUSION

A limitation of this study could be the use of retrospective data for TPs 1 and 2; but the data collected from the seven participants, all of whom were closely associated with the Midget AAA baseball league over the three time periods, helped the researchers describe a portrait

of the league that rang true with the three participants who read it. The examination of the league in this study opens our eyes to the possibilities for developing athletes and coaches when coaches, directors, and officials work together under specific conditions. The use of the CoP framework is helpful in understanding how learning and identity are linked through participation in a shared practice:

> Membership in the CoP offers form and context as well as content to aspiring practitioners, who need to not just acquire the explicit knowledge of the community but also the identity of a community member.
> Thus learning in the sense of becoming a practitioner – which included acquiring not only codebooks but the ability to decode them appropriately – can usefully be thought of a learning to be and contrasted to what Bruner (1996)[4] calls "learning about." The former requires knowing how, the art of practice, much of which lies tacit in a CoP. Learning about only requires the accumulation of knowing that, which confers the ability to talk a good game, but not necessarily to play one.... The CoP's knowledge, in tacit or explicit form, may be distributed across the collective and their shared artifacts rather than held by or divisible among individuals (Hutchins, 1995)[5]. [34, p. 113].

In TP 1 of this study, the knowledge of the coaches of the Midget AAA league was distributed across the collective. Duguid [34] makes a distinction between a CoP and other looser social groups. The ease with which knowledge will either flow or stick depends on the ability and will of group members to share; "people have to engage in similar or shared practices to be able to share knowledge about those practices" (p. 115). In TPs 2 and 3, the lack of a coordinated coaching practice resulted in less sharing and made knowledge stickier.

This case also highlights the importance of the skills of strong leadership and good facilitation. Significantly, previous studies about coaches' CoP have used researchers [10, 42] or consultants [20] as the facilitators, but this study provided the opportunity to examine how the participants changed their own context; and how a sport leader, in this case Andy as TD, facilitated the learning process of his coaches and athletes. Collaboration and interaction between the coaches in TP1, within their coaching practice, allowed for their learning to be very situated [43]. Hughes maintained that in order to move forward with the CoPs model, it is necessary to have "a sustained two-way dialogue with evidence.... between theory and research" [44, p. 39]. This study provides an opportunity for this dialogue.

When Andy moved on to a new job at the end of TP 1, the cooperative approach fell apart and the coaches returned to a more individualistic approach. Lacking Andy's strong leadership, the coaches negotiated the nature of their participation. Within this context, the competitive element tended to take priority over development. This study demonstrates to what point leaders may have to go in order to create a CoP in a competitive environment, and some of the challenges inherent in setting up a league such as Andy did. More research on this topic is needed in order to sustain the dialogue suggested by Hughes [44], and for researchers and practitioners to gain a better understanding of the potential and challenges afforded through applying the concept of CoPs in sport. In reference to these particular findings, it would be interesting to investigate what forms of participation are required to

[4]Bruner, J., *The Culture of Education*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1996.
[5]Hutchins, E., *Cognition in the Wild*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1995.

ensure the longevity of a coaches' CoP in competitive, youth development contexts.

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