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RESEARCH REPORT

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Goalball UK

The 'Goalball Family': A exploration of the social value of Goalball amongst players and communities in the UK.

York St John University
School of Science, Technology and Health
April 2020

Executive Summary

Acknowledgements

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About the Research

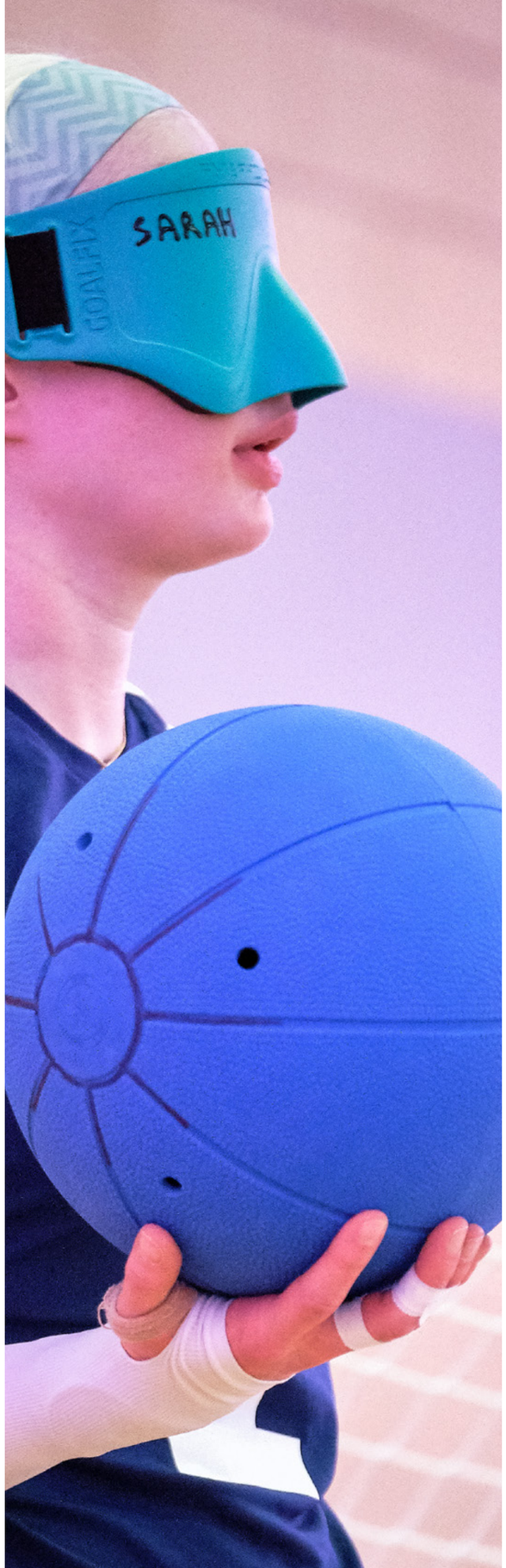
This research was commissioned by Goalball UK in partnership with York St John University to explore the social value of the under researched sport of Goalball. Goalball UK is the National Governing Body for the sport and whose aim is to 'raise the profile of Goalball throughout the UK, promote participation in the sport and achieve success on the international stage' (Goalball UK 2020). This research is arguably the first of its kind in the sport and therefore an important step in providing a voice for those with visual impairments to speak about their lives and the impact Goalball has had on them. One aim of the research was to explore the role of Goalball as a sport in aiding disabled people to be engaged in sport to allow them to fulfil their potential and lead rewarding lives. By providing this marginalised group with an opportunity to voice their thoughts and reflections, it was envisaged that a more nuanced understanding of the benefits disabled people gain from sports participation could be achieved. Furthermore, the research was designed to calculate the social return on the money spent to fund the sport, to provide a monetary value to accompany the voices of those engaged in the sport. It was hoped that this would aid current knowledge in disabled sports participation, whilst explicitly exploring the under researched sport of Goalball.

The Literature

The initial focus of the literature search was to identify any existing literature on Goalball; the little literature available often proved to be from a scientific and quantitative approach (see Karakaya and Ergun 2009; Furtado et al. 2016). However, research in disability sport has seen a rise in interest, with key author Hayley Fitzgerald paving the way. In 2015, Sport England produced a new strategy to tackle physical activity levels across the UK with a specific focus on aiding those who are underrepresented members of society to be physically active. By tackling inactivity, which is particularly prominent amongst those with a disability, Sport England (2016a) state that encouraging those who are completely sedentary as well as those who are moderately active to become involved in physical activity will reap substantial health benefits by reducing the risk of diseases. Therefore, sport is being defined as a critical vehicle for improving the lives of people throughout the UK.

The Research Process

The research adopted a mixed methods approach to answer three research questions: two qualitative and one quantitative. As previously stated, the views and thoughts of visually impaired individuals are largely unknown in Goalball, therefore semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data. Additionally, a Social Return on Investment (SROI) that was adapted from the work of Davies et al. (2019) was conducted using data from Goalball UK to calculate the ratio of money invested to social value output. The qualitative interview data was transcribed and analysed to identify common themes and patterns, and these were then reported.



The Findings

The data from the interviews demonstrates that Goalball plays a significant role in the lives of VI individuals. The fact that the sport is unique in that it was created for VI people as opposed to an adapted version of a sport was highlighted as particularly significant for those who participate as it perpetuated a sense of solidarity and a sense of belonging for the people who were involved. The benefits of participating in Goalball were numerous; physical, social, mental health and wellbeing benefits were cited, as well as the acquisition of new skills that were transferable to other areas of life. Perhaps crucially for this marginalised group, was the sense of connectedness they felt with other VI's when they discussed the notion of the Goalball family. Goalball arguably aids in the development of social capital; in particular, bonding and bridging capital as the sport provides participants with the opportunities to integrate with both VI and non-VI individuals. However, despite the numerous positives and benefits the sport has, it remains largely unheard of, with a distinct lack of awareness in the UK. This arguably has a knock-on effect on the availability of funding, resulting in clubs and participation being in constant jeopardy. Finally, the SROI calculated that for every £1 invested in the sport, £4.31 is generated in social value. A sensitivity analysis that accounts for only 50% of participation numbers calculates the SROI at £2.15. This SROI provides statistical evidence that Goalball is significantly worth investing in due to the sports ability to aid both individuals and wider societal issues.

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Introduction

General Overview

The role of sport in the life of a person with a disability is vastly becoming a hot research topic (Sport England 2016b; Labbe, Miller and Ng 2019). Additionally, the interest in the social value of sports is slowly rising with sports such as swimming investigating the value held by those who participate. The benefits to participating in sport are suggested to be distinctly higher for disabled people than for those without a disability (Martin 2013; Sport England 2016a; Brian et al. 2019). Furthermore, DePauw (2009) notes that disability sport is now heading towards being viewed less as a form of rehabilitation or reintegration programme but more as pure sport for disabled people.

As stated, the exploration of the views and opinions of VI people on their sports participation, particularly in Goalball is largely under researched. The application of sociological concepts such as social capital has been used to explain how and why people participate in activities within certain networks and how this enables and constrains their identity. According to Putnam (2000), social capital is the creation of networks which foster reciprocity and trust. Little is known regarding how VI people develop and accrue social capital in sport or how Goalball provides its players with the opportunity to gain this capital which can be exchanged for other types of capital. Thus, this research aimed to explore Goalball's potential to act as an activity through which bonding and bridging capital could be developed.

Information

- Of England's population of 53 million, 18.4 million or 34.9%, have a long-standing disability or illness, of which 9.4 million (17.6%) have both a long standing and limiting disability/ illness (Sport England 2016b).
- Within this population, 9.8% have a visual impairment, which translates as 959,919 people, with this being 60.7% females and 39.3% males (Sport England 2016b).
- Goalball was developed as a rehabilitation programme for visually impaired veterans in 1946 and is a ball-based game where two teams of three attempt to score goals by bowling the ball across the playing area and into the oppositions net (Goalball UK 2020).
- Bonding capital is the connections between people of similar social backgrounds where relations are built upon trust and familiarity.
- Bridging capital describes a network where individuals with less similar or no commonalities exist. New relations that form in this network can create new communications, opportunities and collaborations.

What does the literature say?

As stated, there has been little research conducted on Goalball, although of the studies that have been conducted, all agree that there are distinctive physical benefits for VI individuals who play Goalball compared with those who do not (Karakaya and Ergun 2009). In a comparative study measuring percentage body fat, Goalball participants saw a higher reduction in body fat compared with a control group who participated in Movement Education (Caliskan et al. 2011). As such, Goalball is an inclusive sport that can help disabled people to strive towards meeting the Chief Medical Officer's physical activity targets (DSHC 2019).

Sport has been extensively researched as a method for improving community cohesion and development (Vali 2007; Misener and Doherty 2012). When comparing levels of socialisation of VI versus non-VI individuals, research has found that those who participate in Goalball have significantly higher social development as it offers the opportunity to feel a sense of belonging. According to Nicholson and Hoye (2008), sociologist Robert Putnam was keen to suggest that sport can be a tool that can (re)build a community as it is a cultural resource that can connect people, improving confidence levels, enjoyment and achievement levels.

Not only does sport have individual benefits such as physical health, mental health, wellbeing and improved socialisation, but sport is continually being viewed as a vehicle by which wider social, economic and physical benefits to communities can be achieved (Davies 2012). Findings from Canadian research suggest it is not the participation in the sport itself that fosters improvement in life skills, rather the interactions with others that improve skill sets. Taylor et al. (2015) conducted a systematic literature review on the benefits of sports participation for wider society and found that sport has an influential effect on possession and accumulation of social capital. However, little is known on specific sports, particularly from a qualitative aspect where participants are given the opportunity to voice their thoughts and reflections.

Although in the early stages of model development, a Social Return on Investment for Sport (SROI) was conducted by Davies et al. (2019). The aim of this was to shed light on the social outcomes generated by sports for society. Using data from health, crime, education, social capital and wellbeing literature, Davies et al. (2019) calculated that the social value of sport was £44.8 billion. This allowed the authors to determine that for every £1 spent on sport, £1.91 was generated in terms of social impact. This positive result demonstrates sports ability to provide individual and wider societal benefits and provides justification for undertaking a similar SROI to understand the role Goalball has in disability sport.

Key Points for Consideration

- Sport participation develops the potential to accrue social capital.
- Goalball is under researched and underrepresented in specific sports data analysis such as the Active Lives Survey by Sport England.
- Goalball provides disabled people with the opportunity to reap many physical, social and wellbeing benefits; disabled people often reap larger benefits from sports participation than non-disabled people.
- The successful use of a Social Return on Investment by Davies et al. (2019) demonstrates how tentative analysis of specific sports can be undertaken to determine the social value of a sport.

Findings

The analysis of the interview data combined with the existing literature generated several key themes. Some of these that were identified include: (i) the Goalball family, (ii) Bonding and Bridging Capital, (iii) the impact of Goalball, (iv) Goalball as a social tool for development, (v) issues in Goalball and (vi) the SROI ratio.

The Goalball Family

For many of the individuals and their families, their disability brought a heightened sense of isolation and loneliness. The finding of Goalball and the sense of belonging was valued extremely highly by all players and their family members and the participants used the terminology of the 'Goalball Family' to describe their connectedness. Furthermore, the participants were willing to travel for extensive lengths of time at significant financial cost just to be involved in the game, showing their dedication and commitment for which in return, they could feel a sense of belonging with others in the same position. For many, the sense of family was due to the uniqueness of the sport; there is no other sport like it in that is not adapted from an able-bodied sport and as such, each participant felt equal to everyone else. Their disability, even if it were to worsen, would not hamper their ability to participate, so they were not afraid to dive in and be involved.

Bonding and Bridging Capital

Responses from participants suggest a level of support within the Goalball network both on and off the court, highlighting how Goalball provides the opportunity to develop both bonding and bridging capital. Several participants discussed how Goalball had given them new confidence to try new things, such as applying for university and liaising with non-VI people in restaurants for example. The development of bonding capital was particularly evident when several participants alluded to the sense of belonging to a team. For many, being visually impaired had previously meant exclusion from team sports, resulting in isolation and loneliness. For some, prior to learning about Goalball, they did not participate in any physical activity, but spoke of how Goalball renewed their sense of purpose regardless as to their level of sight. This acceptance without question was described as crucial to the participants sense of wellbeing and gave many the confidence to engage in developing their bridging capital outside of the sport.

The Impact of Goalball

A common theme that was described by many participants, but particularly by family members was the impact of Goalball on their lives. Although designed as a sport for war veterans' rehabilitation, many participants described an increased understanding and empathy for disabilities. Participants were asked that if Goalball were to no longer be available, for whatever reason, how much would this impact on their lives? The answer was unanimous: massively. Some participants were emotional at the thought and others cited increased suffering with their mental health if they could no longer play. For many family members, their relations involvement in sport resulted in them becoming involved as coaches and volunteers and the sport became a family event. The impact of the sport on these participants was hugely significant.

Goalball as a social tool for development

Putnam (2000) recognised that team sports offer an increased opportunity to create bridging capital. Participation in Goalball competitions in the UK and the rest of the world, allows participants to meet other people that would not be possible in their network. The majority of the participants suggested that Goalball would be a positive and useful tool for finding and engaging isolated individuals to offer the opportunity to engage in a team sport with many benefits. Many suggested that opening Goalball to schools and communities would be beneficial as well as using it in the workplace for team building exercises. The sport offers non-VI individuals the chance to participate in a different game, whilst gaining a better understanding of life with a disability. In this current climate that we live in, where inclusion is at the forefront of many policies, this type of understanding would be beneficial to wider society.

Issues in Goalball

With Goalball's data documenting 729 participants for the year 2018-2019, as well as data from the interviews, one major issue Goalball faces is a distinct lack of awareness across the globe, but in particular, in the UK. When asked to detail what they would like to see in the future for Goalball, all participants described a desire to not have to explain what Goalball is and for it to be an accepted and well recognised sport. Despite the legacy of the 2012 Paralympic Games, Goalball remains largely unknown and as such, struggles to secure sufficient funding to successfully open and maintain clubs around the UK. Many participants spoke of the reliance on applying for grants on a regular basis, with the sport having to work both grassroots and elite levels from the same funding pot. These issues arguably will affect the sports potential to develop individual's social capital, as without increased participation and funding, the sport cannot hope to grow. Without growth, Putnam (2000) argues that bridging capital development will reach a level where individuals are excluded and turn inwards to their inner networks, resulting in isolation.

The SROI Ratio

The SROI was adapted and based on the work of Davies et al. (2019). Using data direct from Goalball UK that included participation numbers of players and volunteers as well as input from key stakeholders, the outputs were calculated as health benefits (reduction of diseases/ improved good health) of £307,581 and other benefits including crime and subjective well-being of £1,213,430. This provided a total amount of outputs of £1,521,011. By adding the total value of the outcomes and then dividing this total by the inputs (£352,170), an SROI ratio of 4.31 was calculated. In other words, for every £1 spent on Goalball during the second year of their four-year funding cycle, £4.31 worth of social impact was generated. After conducting a sensitivity analysis to account for variations in participation rates up to 50%, the SROI value is £2.15. This, in light of Davies et al. (2019) SROI for sport in general which calculated a ratio of 1.91, demonstrates Goalball's ability to be a worthwhile financial investment based on the depth of the outcomes.

Quotes

"It's also given me a sense of belonging to a team again… and one thing that I said was the sense of belonging that gives to a visual impaired person, that sense of belonging to a lot of visually impaired people is priceless."

Participant 9

"We've learnt about Goalball, you learn from the game, you learn from the people. It's definitely added to our lives. And it's definitely become a part of our lives, all of us as a family."

Participant 5

"They may have lost their sight, they may be visually impaired, but at the end of the day, they are still themselves and they have great fun together."

Participant 10

"Yeah and it's, you know, it's just explaining to people that it's not just a sport. It's VI awareness, it's team building, it's a great thing in employment, it's a team building exercise."

Participant 13

"You can play it fully sighted. It's not really just for people that are visually impaired… Once you're goggled out and you've got your blackout stickers on your eyes and you're all blacked out, you're all equal."

Participant 10

"I think the community is again, just being able to exchange information and just being able to be part of a community where for once you are not the only person to be using a white cane."

Participant 3

"we call it the goalball family and it isn't just the UK family, once you're part of that, if you travel abroad, you become part of the Goalball international family."

Participant 5

"when you're in Goalball, you're a Goalball player, you're a coach, you're a referee, you're not blind. You're not a non-sighted, know what I mean, just a Goalball player."

Participant 12

"I've learnt so much off the court, not just on the court. With being around the lads with a similar disability, just seeing how the lads deal with things and adapt and do things- obviously when you lose your sights, one of the main things that is hard that goes is your independence really."

Participant 7

"That's a scary thought. Life without Goalball, that's no… I don't even wanna think about that question.

Participant 1

"I think the fact that there's nothing locally- that can give her what Goalball can give her and as a parent who has struggled to try and make their child fit in anywhere. We've tried every sport, we've tried every activity, and if we have to travel all-round the UK or anywhere round the world, for her to put a smile on her face and to connect with other young people and feel positive about herself- what parent wouldn't do that?

Participant 11a

Opportunities for Development

Increased Awareness

- All participants described a desire for Goalball to be better known across the UK and to get the recognition it deserves. By introducing the sport into schools and writing it in as part of the PE curriculum, many felt that this would cement Goalball as a normal sport and aid visually impaired people to engage in a team sport.
- Increased social media and generic media presence were also desired by all participants as being important for promoting the sport.

Financial Support

- Participants cited difficulties in training sessions running and clubs maintaining themselves due to low financial investment.
- Elite players described how unlike other sports, they were not paid to play and often had to invest their own time and money to commit to the high levels of the sport.
- Reduced training opportunities were alluded to as a reason for lower league positioning in international and national competitions. This resulted in reduced investment/funding, highlighting the vicious circle Goalball finds itself within.
- The breadth and depth of benefits alluded to by participants suggests the sport needs critical financial investment if it is to continue in providing these current participants and future ones with the opportunity to accrue vital social capital.

Statistical data on Goalball

- There is a distinct lack of recorded data on the participation numbers, frequency and intensity of Goalball players. Analysing Goalball in this way and including it within Sport England's Active Lives Survey would arguably aid the sport in (i) gaining recognition, (ii) understanding who participates to facilitate sessions and training more consistently and (iii) to aid the sports growth and development.
- The SROI demonstrates Goalball's vast ability to tackle wider social issues as well as positively impact those who already participate. Further developmental work on the SROI is needed so that further SROI's can be done in the future to provide Goalball with long-term analysis options and thus, relevant and detailed intervention plans.
- By recording Goalball data, an increased awareness of disability sport can be gained, particularly for those with visual impairments. If Sport England are to evaluate their successes and failures of policies such as Towards an Active Nation, sports such as Goalball cannot be ignored in generic sport surveys and data.

Conclusion

This research has demonstrated that whilst the benefits of participating in sport are well documented, little is known regarding Goalball and the social value it instigates through its participants. Through semi-structured interviews and a quantitative SROI, this research has provided a voice for a marginalised group of people in an under researched, unknown sport. There exists a distinct lack of awareness on what Goalball actually is, whilst the clubs currently running and the national governing body supporting all those involved, struggles to find sufficient funding to continue making the positive pathways it does with disabled people.

The findings from this study highlight the significant breath of benefits that Goalball brings for VI people. The potential of Goalball to instigate bonding capital amongst members of the VI community is hugely significant and life changing for many of those interviewed. A new sense of confidence and self-esteem, combined with the acquisition of new skills lead participants to strive to achieve things outside of Goalball, such as job promotions, starting work, enrolling at university and so forth demonstrating Goalball's ability to act as a form of bridging capital to integrate VI with non-VI people. Other themes that were identified included, (i) the Goalball family, (ii) Bonding and Bridging Capital, (iii) the impact of Goalball, (iv) Goalball as a social tool for development, (v) issues in Goalball and (vi) the SROI ratio.

Possible areas for development that were discussed by the participants included increasing awareness in the sport so that explanations around what the sport actually is would no longer be necessary. Increased funding availability to ensure clubs can maintain their day-to-day operations were also cited by all participants. The calculation of the SROI for Goalball demonstrates that whilst the sport positively impacts VI participants in various ways and that the return on investment is high, there is still room for improvement in the recording of Goalball data. To aid Goalball's future development, regular documenting and analysing of participation, intensity and frequency rates are just some of the data that could be used to conduct further SROI's. This could aid Goalball's planning and trajectory for future inventions and plans.

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