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Minor Leagues: The Commercialization of Youth Sports  
and its Implications for Privatization in Education

By

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A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction for the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Education

in the Graduate Division of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in Charge:

Professor Bruce Fuller, Chair

Professor Daniel Perlstein

Professor Todd Laporte

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## Abstract

### Minor Leagues: The Commercialization of Youth Sports and its Implications for Privatization in Education

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As scholars and policymakers across disciplines argue the merits of market influences in public schooling, few have taken aim at the ongoing privatization of youth sports. Even as treatment for the poor academic performances of disadvantaged groups, too many point to the perceived cultural shortcomings of the children and their families, and ignore the inadequacies of the underlying opportunity structures. This phenomenon also manifests itself in the characterization of athletics as a potentially harmful distraction to youth in underserved communities and as an asset to youth in privileged backgrounds. While such an assertion trivializes prevailing systemic inequalities in access to opportunities, it also ignores the realities of contemporary youth sports institutions, which have become highly commercialized as pathways to college admission. This case study utilizes organizational and institutional theory to illustrate the broad-based participation in the youth athletic enterprise facilitated by the grassroots marketing divisions within a multi-national sports apparel firm. More specifically, this project identifies the actors within these institutional fields—namely young athletes and their families, youth club and college coaches, event planners and corporate marketing representatives—and the motivations, demands, and associated responses that drive their behaviors. It demonstrates that these actors span a range of racial and socioeconomic backgrounds, all of whom act simultaneously as “buyers” and “sellers” of services within the market context. However, the demands of this privatized field transcend technical efficiency and material benefit, as institutional-normative legitimacy also takes on great significance. Accordingly, these actors respond to the demands they face, both by adapting their behaviors as well as leveraging their resources to assert their expectations on other groups. Finally, this investigation of a market-based youth structure informs a discussion of the implications of privatization in public schooling.

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For all the rancor that typically surrounds discussion of market influences in public K-12 education, the commercialization of youth sports has attracted remarkably little controversy in the public realm, if any attention at all. As skeptics have scoffed at the nation's children attending public schools featuring market dynamics such as private service contracts or performance pay, there is little public outrage over the profit-based tournament organizers and retail recruiting services infiltrating prime after-school activities. Further, even as people debate whether educational institutions too often exploit underserved children for revenue, various organizations in the youth sports world net considerable income from the participation of young athletes, in some cases even into their adulthood. Moreover, while accessibility to time and space for exercise continues to decrease on school campuses, various businesses are attempting to expand their market share in sports for children. Still, these commercial entities largely aim to develop a consumer base ultimately comprised of those they hope are the “best” athletes. This phenomenon in youth life has nonetheless remained off the radar of educational advocates who argue the merits of public vs. private systems with respect to their capacities to reduce educational inequality.

While policymakers and stakeholders throughout the field of education continue to explore potential implementations of market structures within public schooling systems, any determination of impact must lend attention to its effects on the students and families who have been underserved in the traditional system. If proponents of privatization continue to promote its efficacy and decry the inability of the conventional public system to close the achievement gap, it follows that the effectiveness of market measures hinge upon its ability to effect equity within the system. Incidentally, it is undoubtedly a challenge to assess the potential impact of a large-scale paradigm shift in policy without first implementing the new model. Consequently, it is useful to examine a case from a parallel youth opportunity structure environment that can inform how the influence of the market in a youth institutional field might play out in the educational landscape.

As an aspect of youth life whose structure has already undergone a significant transformation from public to largely private over the past two decades, youth athletics present an appealing case for an examination of the effects of market penetration in schooling. First, the landscape of youth athletics—starting as early as elementary school—has shifted significantly from primarily a public recreation service to a viable opportunity structure for youth and their families to make material and educational gains over time. The prospect of college athletic recruitment—and, to a lesser degree, careers in professional sports—has generated a burgeoning marketplace in which youth and their families invest considerable amounts of their time, energy, and money. Additionally, the market has generated various short-term inducements for participants, such that in some cases they stand to obtain material benefits such as free shoes, apparel, and trips to various premier events across the country (and in some cases, the world) (Sokolove, 2009). Next, young athletes and their families are in many cases able to engage in sports activities according to their resources and their preferences (that is, they engage in a free market). Finally, perhaps the most compelling rationale for examining youth sports as a comparative case is the idea that many of the United States' most prolific athletes are black males from disadvantaged backgrounds. The implication is that, though there may not be equal access to participation across sports, there is little evidence of a black-white achievement gap. That is, children (such as black males) may enter



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this system from a position of disadvantage, but they do not necessarily experience a greater likelihood of poor performance as athletes. This runs counter to conventional wisdom surrounding the academic gap.

This dissertation explores the implications of market influences in education, with youth athletics as a case. More specifically, it investigates the distinct motives for the different stakeholders to collaborate within the field. More than critique the commercialization of contemporary youth activities, the crux of this analysis illuminates the various organizational and power dynamics that often mold them (though more conclusive positions do appear in the discussion chapter). I utilize institutional theory as a means to illustrate what motivates certain organizations and individuals within the institutional field to provide services and/or make choices for their direct benefit, while simultaneously cooperating with and conforming to the normalized rules the environment in which they are nested. Institutional theory describes the ways in which norms, structures, behaviors and relationships form, change and interact to shape the culture maintained by actors in a larger field. It illuminates a distinction between technical efficiency concerns—those issues having to do with the details of production and profit—and institutional norms—which pertain more to issues of legitimacy, external relations, and survival over time.

These social and cultural norms and practices shape the commonalities and similarities in organizational behaviors, structures, rules, and roles, even if the organizations appear to have distinct aims. That is, an apparel company, a high school coach, and a college coach nested in the same field may all coordinate to provide services to a certain basketball player in accordance with a particular set of norms, but they likely have different reasons for doing so. In such a context, the role of the family and the question of influence take on significance. An examination of each contributes to an understanding of the extent to which participant families within the institutional field are able to shape the landscape of the field and the organizations within it. Although organizational theory typically describes formal organizations as responsible for shaping the landscape of the institutional field, families can play critical roles as consumers in child-centered environments. Thus, youth athletics offers a compelling case to describe how such dynamics play out within a youth opportunity structure, which young participants and their families attempt to navigate in order to marshal the resources necessary to achieve their goals. This project utilizes case study method to analyze artifacts, interviews, and observational data to investigate how market behaviors impact youth institutions.

In an effort to understand the education environment through an examination of the youth athletics field, this case study project investigates the following questions:

- Who are the key organizational and individual actors that are active in the field of competitive youth sports (focusing on basketball and lacrosse)?
- How do the core actors (families, private firms and public institutions) describe their central motivations pertaining to participation within the field?
- What technical-efficiency and institutional-normative demands do these core actors face as they vie for influence in the field, and where do they come from?
- How do these core private actors respond to these technical-efficiency and institutional-normative demands in this field?

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These questions aim to chart the landscape of this field while also investigating the power dynamics at play.

### *Theoretical Framework*

The spirit behind this project is concerned with improving the education of disenfranchised youth within the United States. Traditionally, scholars and policymaker largely discuss educational reform for this population as a function of the child. That is, they assume pathology around the conditions of the child and his or her performance, despite the challenging systemic realities in which they live. Much of the language tied to reform concerns ways in which educators can address the outcomes that low-performing populations appear to be unable or unwilling to achieve—particularly in the classroom. To follow this approach largely ignores the significance of larger contextual factors that historically elude the control of students and their families. In a departure from this conventional line of policy logic, certain policy stakeholders have begun to invoke market mechanisms as more effective means of improving education for disadvantaged youth.

Proponents of privatization in education invoke it as a means of combating the black-white achievement gap (which also pertains to Latinos as a low-performing group), a commonly recognized symbol of inequality and ineffectiveness in the schooling system (Bok, 2000; Coons & Sugarman, 1978; Godwin & Kemerer, 2002). Inherent in its conceptualization is a latent pathology of the black and Latino child. The characterization of the “gap” in literature and policy discussions suggests that black and Latino children do not generally perform to the standards of white children, hence the need for educational reform.<sup>1</sup> The market approach allows for the framing of the issue as a function of the educational system, and not the deficiencies of the children. It identifies structure, practice and personnel as levers of reform. More specifically, the market approach points to competition, incentives, and accountability as elements that will push adult actors within education to serve children better, but are absent from traditional educational bureaucracies. Still, the varied critiques of this framework question its capacity to function in the interest of marginalized populations, as they typically lack necessary resources to purchase goods and services.

Critics of market mechanisms in education assert that they merely offer illusory elements of choice and competition, and ultimately cannot live up to the claim that they are better suited to improve education for disenfranchised youth (Apple, 1999; Carnoy, 2003; Lacerino-Paquet & Holyoke, 2002; Levin, 1980). The argument is that allowing educational institutions to operate in accordance with market structures and/or behaviors disrupts an emphasis on the needs of students. Moreover, the supposed scholarly interests of the policymaker and market entities with influence within the field take precedence over those of the disenfranchised children and families, who have traditionally lacked a voice. The implication is that market structures are inadequately equipped to anchor public schooling and eliminate the achievement gap. Nevertheless, proponents of privatization believe it gives parents more agency (choice) than they have had in a traditional education bureaucracy. It

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<sup>1</sup> While the public discussion of this gap largely hones in on blacks, whites, and Latinos to some extent, the actual performance gap itself encompasses a range of underperforming demographic groups. In comparison with whites and certain Asian ethnicities, Native Americans, Pacific Islanders, Southeast Asians all struggle as well.

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appears that both advocates and critics of markets in education share one view: that the opposing educational structure lacks the capacity to respond to the demands of the parents. This project employs institutional theory to explore this argument and illuminate key considerations in assessing the utility of privatization in schooling.

Institutional theory illuminates the larger context through which various actors make decisions in navigating an educational field. Additionally, it asserts that choice, influence, and competition are all tied up in a framework shaped by myriad actors within any field. Additionally, institutional theory offers a means to focus on formal organizations, individual actors, and other considerations for educational reform, such as resource allocation and decision-making. In examining the implications of increasing privatization, I look at organized youth athletics and identify the myriad actors, their roles, and how their motivations and behavior shape the basketball and lacrosse fields.

Youth athletics provides a compelling case for comparison with the educational sector, as it constitutes a youth field that has become increasingly privatized and commercialized. From an early age, participants in the youth sports field can access a broad range of organizations—many of which operate for profit—based on their personal preferences. Moreover, those who excel at the highest levels of competition (within their age brackets) can access various material benefits in both the short and long term. Thus, exploring this field characterized by greater market influence than schooling systems lends to an analysis of what educational institutions might look like if they underwent increased privatization. More specifically, this project investigates the extent to which various actors are able to shape the institutional field. While the experiences and behaviors of the young athletes and their families are important, this study focuses largely on the perspective of organizational actors within youth sports. This allows for a closer examination of who and what shapes the context in which youth and their families ultimately participate. Further, it departs from the conventional scrutiny of youth behavior. Finally, the institutional analysis is consistent with the assertion that an understanding of the function of a youth institution requires attention to the organizations within the field, and not just the youth who occupy it. With all that said, participants and their families constitute critical actors within the field, hence accounts of family experiences do appear throughout the forthcoming chapters.

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### **Schooling and Privatization**

The fundamental neoliberal belief that government and public organizations lack the capacity to provide adequate services to society largely contributes to competing notions regarding the implementation and impact of privatization in schools and school systems. Aside from empirical investigations as to the effects of market measures on student outcomes, much of the relevant research is couched in ideological, political and normative terms. It is difficult to compile reliable data on outcomes, but work has been done across a range of perspectives to argue the merits and shortcomings of privatization. Pragmatically speaking, the market reform debate centers on the capacity of a system to improve upon the status quo and better serve the populations that have traditionally not fared well—largely black and Latino students. Within this debate, the matter of families' ability to make decisions that allow them to pursue their own goals is a focal point within the literature. Consequently, this study employs an

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institutional theory lens in order to investigate the role of family power and influence in shaping the larger implications of privatization in education.

In the literature on markets and education, the issue of power is of particular importance when discussing policies intended to impact disadvantaged groups. Power refers not only to the ability of actors within a field to participate and make choices within its institutions, but also to the ability to shape the structure, culture, norms, and outcomes of those institutions. Poor schooling quality is in effect a proxy for groups who have experienced a continued history of poverty, racial discrimination and marginalization, or groups not typically thought to possess a great deal of agency. That is, the marginalized groups receive poorer educational quality and resources. Incidentally, people from these groups have generally experienced less choice and greater difficulty in improving their material conditions through neoliberal avenues (i.e. the free market), as they have had less resources to start with. Hence, in the policy realm, proponents of market reform advocate for the agency of students and families, instead of private organizations and service providers.

The question market proponents must answer is whether students' families can assert their demands to shape the landscape of the market paradigm, or if business interests drive the model and families are ultimately merely subjects with limited choice. This question is more ideological in that it transcends a literal interpretation. For example, it asks if it is possible that a family enrolled in a school choice program could actually be enacting a role prescribed by the political economy of the environment. Conversely, it also addresses the possibility that a family that neither enrolls in any program nor is fully knowledgeable of the options can still possess agency and be enacting choice in the marketplace. Critics of privatization believe private organizations ultimately possess the agency, in that they control the market and primarily serve their own interests. Hence, they believe the agency of the firm effectively detracts from the commitment to the educational objectives of the child. Nevertheless, proponents assert that private organizations only protect their own interests to the extent that they must align their operation with market demand—which is determined by the families—in order to assure their own survival. Whereas the market literature largely discusses agency as a dichotomous concept, this study lends greater complexity to the concepts influence and power within an institutional field. Specifically, I draw upon five core elements of institutional theory:

- The distinction between technical efficiency and institutional demands
- The architecture of institutional fields
- Legitimacy
- Capacity for influence
- Institutional behavior and response to environmental conditions

Early organizational theorists envisioned organizations as primarily concerned with task environments. That is, they mainly grapple with manipulating their technical core and internal structure as a means of responding to shifts in information and resources in the external environments, without much attention to influencing the composition of said environments. In short, task environments largely deal with outputs and technical efficiency. Institutional theory builds on this by developing the concept of the institutional field. In this field, the social, political, legal, and professional contexts establish norms and practices—or inputs—that grant legitimacy to its actors. In the educational task environment, research and development, resource allocation, master scheduling, and staff placement are all examples of duties that

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organizations fulfill as a means of developing their technical cores. Still, education is a sector whose day-to-day operations are largely defined by mix of deeply-rooted and ever-changing institutional norms. Hence, a school may continue to hold classes in various “traditional” classroom settings and configurations, break the day into several periods, and utilize a bell system to alert everyone that it is time to transition, just as countless schools throughout the nation have done for decades. Yet, that same school may also elect to implement a brand new professional development or assessment program, based on the fact that they have become popular among schools in a successful district hundreds or thousands of miles away. Moreover, in this sector it can be difficult at times to draw clear distinctions between technical efficiency and institutional norms. That is, certain procedures and expected outcomes may be taken for granted as highly technical in nature, but they could be the result of various determinations and traditions developed over time, without any fidelity to measures of efficiency or overall realization of goals.

### **Commercialization in Youth Sports**

Perhaps emblematic of a larger phenomenon related to youth institutions, competitive youth sports—including basketball and lacrosse—largely follow a similar environmental pattern. The lines between key technical aspects such as competitive outcomes, player quality, and training are typically blurred by institutional elements such as rule enforcement, ranking systems, and restrictions imposed on frequency and duration of team activities. Therefore, it follows that the institutional field at times informs, shapes, and even assumes the guise of technical efficiency components. This is of particular importance when considering how the technical efficiency demands of the market context are shaped by institutional norms. In order to understand the impact of privatization on the youth sports (and ultimately, education) field, this study distinguishes technical and institutional demands within the field, and investigates the roles of various actors—including families—play in shaping them.

In examining the area of organized youth sports—particularly at the high school level—it is useful to envision the institutional actors within a given environment as participating in a larger institutional field. In drawing from Scott (2003), an institutional field is defined by the set of norms and structures enacted by the actors within it. Although organizations are often key components of institutional fields, they by no means exclusively comprise their relevant actors. When considering the field, we can also consider individuals and/or factions of individuals as actors as well. Thus, the high school basketball field includes governing bodies (and the rules they make and enforce), teams, service and equipment providers, and the families of participants. Incidentally, each actor must respond to a particular set of technical and institutional demands in order to complete its particular function, while—if they possess agency—they may simultaneously shape those demands.

New institutionalism builds upon institutional theory in that it expands upon the idea that institutional actors adapt in order to gain legitimacy within the field, by suggesting that actors also work to define what is legitimate in the first place. Thus, new institutionalism provides a framework to understand power, influence, and consequence among actors within an institutional field. While much of the literature has focused on organizations, this dissertation provides a more nuanced narrative of the extent to which children and families (thought of as consumers in this context) shape legitimacy within a youth institutional field.

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Developing a conceptualization of influence serves two purposes in this study. First, it explores the idea that the capacity to exert power and influence must also refer to the service of interests. That is, if an actor or—group of actors—does not possess influence within an institution, that actor must sit in a marginalized position within that field, and can thus expect a corresponding service experience. This is particularly salient when considering children and families that come from underprivileged backgrounds. If they already lack agency in society and are similarly marginalized within youth institutions, there can be little expectation that the institution will work on their behalf. Secondly, from a policy perspective, a discussion of influence within an institutional field helps to identify the locus (or loci) of control in the field. Further, identifying the locus control allows for the identification of any policy levers for reform, which has implications for reform. That is, if the market approach to the provision of youth services requires improvement or adjustment, it is important to know which actors have the power to shape the norms, practices and structures of the field.

The final institutional element pertinent to the development of this project is the actual institutional behavior within the field, and the manner in which the various actors within a field respond to the environmental conditions. In a distinct move away from more classical organizational theory, DiMaggio and Powell (1983) submit the concept of isomorphism, a process in which organizations engage as a means of adapting to environmental conditions. Whereas earlier organizational theory suggests that organizations risk failure and elimination if their internal structure does not align well with shifts in the external environment, DiMaggio and Powell assert that organizations adapt to shifts by engaging in a process by which they emulate the structures of more successful and/or legitimate organizations. Further, Powell argues that, through the process of isomorphism, organizations—be they bureaucratic or profit-driven—take on more hybrid organizational forms, such that they are not wholly driven by technical efficiency and profit maximization, nor are they wholly concerned with organizational hierarchy and relationships. Consequently, these organizations increase their chances for survival by better adapting their operations and structures in order to cooperate with other actors in the institutional field. This conceptualization of isomorphism and hybridization is key in understanding two phenomena: 1) how it could be that so many non-profit and for-profit organizations could simultaneously coexist and cooperate within crowded youth sports institutional fields; and 2) how it is that so many of these organizations appear to be so similar to one another, in terms of structure and behavior. As this dissertation employs institutional theory to explicate in large part the nature of organizations in relationship to families, it also helps illuminate some of the significant ideas and phenomena that the sociology of youth sports does not.

While current sociological work surrounding youth athletics may not adequately capture the nature of youth participation in the field, it does lend a deeper explanation to the latent power dynamics. Neither institutional theory nor sociology affords an adequate analysis of this aspect of youth life on its own. The reality is that narratives around participation in youth sports (including as it relates to academic achievement(Cook & Ludwig, 1998; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986a)) has too often focused on the faces of disenfranchised without speaking to the greater systemic patterns, motivations and behaviors. Still, it holds that the color of the faces in this story and their corresponding wealth (or lack thereof) shape the motivations, demands, behaviors of the various actors within the system. The charge of this project is to de-mystify

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and deconstruct co certain conventional sociological depictions of race in this field and accordingly carve out a space for an organizational and systemic perspective that is vital to the analysis of this youth sports phenomenon. Additionally, this deconstruction of one sociological aspect—race—to open up the examination of institutional aspects subsequently gives way to the investigation of an additional sociological construct—class. As one examines the racial features and institutional patterns underlying these basketball and lacrosse fields, it becomes apparent that access to material resources is paramount to their function.

Ultimately, organized sports institutions at all levels are dominated by the most socio-economically well-off populations. Without question, some of the most visible and prominent athletes in American sports are black or Latino males from disadvantaged backgrounds. Still, ownership, management, administration, coaching, participation, and spectatorship (among others) are all predominately comprised of white males at the middle and upper income levels. This rings true at each level of sports organization, whether it be a for-profit professional league or a non-profit youth organization. Thus, the same demographic patterns for participation hold for youth sports. White males from moderate or better income levels engage in organized sports with the greatest frequency of any group. That is, youth sports—just as at every other level—are dominated by privileged families, across sport type. This has been the case since organized children's athletics became mainstream following World War II.<sup>2</sup>

The typical starting age—as well as the general intensity of activity—in organized competition has changed over time. Children are starting to compete at an earlier age on average, and more children than ever play an organized sport before their first day of elementary school. Perhaps the most glaring feature of contemporary participation in youth athletics has been the greater frequency of cases of specialization among youth (Sabo & Veliz, 2008). Young athletes are now more likely to play the same organized sport year-round, as opposed to switching sports as the seasons change. This has been made possible by the advent of traveling club teams, which compete in events outside of the traditional interscholastic season (Coakley, 2009; Pennington, 2008). The expansion of the enterprise based on these types of opportunities has been largely driven by families' desire for their children to gain access to higher education through athletic recruitment and/or scholarships. Thus, hosts of for-profit and non-profit organizations alike now coordinate to create elaborate markets for training and competition opportunities across a broad range of youth sports. Moreover, hosts of families continue to dedicate considerable time and financial resources each year to support their children's budding amateur athletic careers. As the youth sports environment has transformed over time, access to opportunities has increasingly become a function of access to resources. Still, much of the sociological work on sports—particularly youth athletics—has neglected the impact of class posed by a market context.

Whereas sociologists appear to understate the role of socioeconomic status in children's activities, they present clear arguments pertaining to the salience of race. Incidentally, they frequently link racial phenomena to educational considerations, particularly in relationship to black males. Despite the fact that studies reveal athletic participation to be an aspect of life more common to privileged youths, much of the scholarship asserts that young black males

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<sup>22</sup> The prevalence of veterans benefits, the development and expansion of suburbs in major metropolitan areas, and New Deal programs brought about construction of youth recreation facilities and organized extracurricular activities.

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have demonstrated a disproportionate preoccupation with sports (Edwards, 1992; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986b; Hoch, 1972; Lapchick, 1996; Sage, 1990). This supposed obsession is due in large part to the fact that black males have enjoyed great achievements in high-profile sports such as basketball, football, baseball, and track and field. Consequently, theory suggests that black males are disproportionately preoccupied with advancement through athletics, and thus they are not academically motivated, which leads them to perform at lower levels in the classroom. Thus, the implication is that black families' involvement in sports is not only abnormal, but also particularly detrimental to that community. This study examines this framework by investigating two case environments—one centered on basketball, the other centered on lacrosse—characterized by different socioeconomic and racial demographics. It ultimately explores the extent to which the market context—defined by the institutional field—informs or supersedes the conventional frame, shaped by race.

### *Case study*

The study examines the structures, processes, interactions and influences within two “hybrid” institutional fields constructed around two different sports, basketball and lacrosse. It focuses on two levels of analysis of actors within the fields: 1) organizations and/or firms and 2) families or groups of families.<sup>3</sup> As each sport appears to constitute its own field, I utilize observation, interview, and artifacts to analyze each as its own case, and then conduct analysis across cases. Basketball is the nation's most popular participatory sport, and also comprises the most complex and expansive non-scholastic youth sports field, while also producing the most revenue-generating potential. Additionally, it is a sport in which there continues to be a great deal of participation across demographic groups, and low-income and minority athletes have enjoyed considerable conspicuous athletic success at the most competitive levels. Lacrosse provides a compelling comparison case as it is the fastest growing high school sport for young men and young women, yet it has limited revenue potential over time since there is not a particularly popular or expansive structure at the college or professional levels. Further, its equipment costs and its upper-crust Northeastern origins have combined to make the sport one that has traditionally been comprised of white and well-off youth. The fields are consistent with Powell and Dimaggio's (1983) conceptualization of hybrid organizations, in that they are neither primarily profit-maximizing, nor are they driven by organizational hierarchy. Rather, in the interest of survival and adaptation, they structure themselves and operate in a way that facilitates cooperation with external actors, including competitors.

The case study investigates these two sports environments at the elite high school level. The project focuses on events facilitated by a single apparel firm, adidas. adidas is a global apparel firm whose primary product has traditionally been footwear. In an effort to expand its market share and compete with other major firms, adidas has had a rich history of working to obtain endorsements and brand loyalty from high-profile and youth athletes. Accordingly, it was among the first firms to institute its own youth athletics infrastructure, therefore it constitutes a compelling case for analysis. Specifically, adidas hosts, sponsors, and licenses a

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<sup>3</sup> While “families” refers to a supposed group containing youth sports participants and some number of relatives, for the purposes of this analysis these families almost constitute individual units, who ultimately make decisions and behave singularly. Of course, individuals within the family take on different roles, and thus they still represent a collective.



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series of events for elite high school athletes in basketball and lacrosse among (several others). At this juncture there are a number of large firms also involved in such undertakings, the most influential of which are apparel companies.

“Elite” refers to participation both at high levels of competition and selectivity, typically defined or constrained by geographical boundaries, but not by enrollment in any educational institution. Additionally, characterization of participation at an elite level requires some form of competition at a national level. Teams that compete at the interscholastic level can only select from a talent pool bounded by their school enrollment, and thus are not elite. Furthermore, teams that can select from a broader talent pool but only compete at a city or regional level, or within the constraints of a league setting, are not elite. This is not to say that youth participants who do not play on the elite level are not elite talent, nor does it mean that all elite-level participants are the most talented in their jurisdictions. Ultimately, an elite participant or team is characterized by the efforts of individuals and/or teams to play in the most competitive possible environment at events open to participants across the nation. In a market context, elite participants are in the highest demand and accordingly garner the most resources.

While basketball and lacrosse constitute compelling elements of case analysis of adidas grassroots—or youth—initiatives, they also present distinctive sub-cases. As one sub-study, basketball represents an athletic field in which minority (particularly black males) and low-income youth comprise significant proportions—if not the majority—of participants at the elite level. Despite the explanation of the greater success of black males in basketball as a function of socio-cultural factors, most scholars miss that its complex and high-grossing revenue potential offer potential material benefits to elite youth participants in the short term as well as the long term. That is, in the market environment, organizations provide various incentives for the best players to participate in their infrastructure. According to the grassroots model, mediocre players spend money with hope of garnering the same attention and resources as the elite players. Additionally, those elite players can also expose their youth consumer peers to the brand so they, too can spend money and boost revenues. Thus, in the study of a basketball field I analyze the ways in which various actors simultaneously shape and adapt the field, within a context of tangible long-term and short-term benefits. In conducting observations and interviews, I illuminate how different actors (i.e. parents, club coaches, college coaches, and apparel companies) perceive the overarching institutional and technical demands tied to the operation of elite institutions. Additionally, this work investigates where these demands come from and how these actors go about responding to them.

Conducting a case study of elite youth sports as a means of investigating privatization in education presents a couple key advantages. First, case study method allows for the investigation of a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context. With the aid of the institutional theory lens, this method allows for an in-depth analysis of the process through which adidas and other key actors have sought to expand its influence on youth sport participation, and the institutional field has shaped its strategy implementation. Next, as mentioned earlier, privatization in education has remained a highly contentious issue in both the political and evidentiary sense (Burch, 2009; Chubb & Moe, 1990; Friedman, 1955; Lieberman & Haar, 2003; Murphy, Gilmer, Weise, & Page, 1998). Thus, scholarship on the matter has in some ways been clouded by biases and ancillary agendas (Henig, 2008).

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Conversely, growing privatization in sports has hardly been a matter of public dispute, even as youth athletics has followed the trend. Consequently, youth athletics provides a seemingly more objective landscape for an exploration of a larger phenomenon. Moreover, the private, for-profit nature of the summer events that I study actually has worked to plant them among the nation's most prominent and highly-regarded in their respective sports. Thus, there are national implications, as well as implications for the impact of privatization in the education realm. Finally, the construction of a narrative surrounding the institutional dynamics in the commercialized sports field—particularly with regards to the formation of institutional demands— provides an avenue through which I can then draw comparisons and make inferences as to relative considerations in public schooling contexts.

### Literature Review

In a policy environment where—as Cuban and Tyack (1998) put it—there is nothing new under the sun, and various approaches continue to cycle through over time, it is almost remarkable that the debate over privatization has maintained a prominent position within the realm of educational policy discussions. This peculiar phenomenon has largely been driven by an interaction between the association of political and interest groups to certain policies with a lack of clarity with respect to the ultimate effectiveness of policy reforms. As fiscal conservatives and other prime proponents of privatization have lobbied for reform over time, different policy initiatives have gained varying degrees of traction in public circles. Further, so much of the research data on market reforms either is inconclusive or contradicts other related findings, and thus it has rarely served to strengthen an argument one way or another. As a result, perhaps more useful is an examination of a parallel realm of youth life operating in a market context. Much like schooling, youth sports are now greatly commercialized, and private firms play an ever-increasing role. Leagues and events are often run by firms and organizations operating for profit, perhaps the most significant of which are global sports apparel companies such as Nike, adidas, and Under Armour. While examining this realm may not show whether privatization benefits or harms young people on aggregate, it presents some key policy considerations with regards to how market-based youth opportunity structures might function. More specifically, it illuminates questions of power, access, and influence within this context.

In reviewing the literature, I first examine the nature of the debate surrounding schooling and markets. Next, I review the literature on institutional theory as a means of explaining how various actors working in a market environment must behave in a way that balances demands for profits with demands for legitimacy. Finally, I discuss the literature on the sociology of sport and youth in order to identify the patterns of participation, as well as areas in the scholarship that require further research.

#### *Schooling and markets*

Milton Friedman (though not the first scholar to have his privatization proposals taken seriously) first delivered an impactful blow to conventional wisdom around public schooling when he introduced his universal voucher proposals in 1955 (Friedman, 1955). Through various technical and political shifts, multiple permutations of voucher proposals appeared since that time, with perhaps the most elaborate and controversial arising in Wisconsin and Ohio in the mid and early 1990s. Nevertheless, as they redirect resources from public institutions to private schools, vouchers proved to be a more divisive political issue, which made charter schools (among other forms of decentralization) more attractive and viable to proponents of privatization (Henig, 2008). Incidentally, charter schools—which first appeared sporadically in the 1960s and 1970s—also made their large-scale political debut in the Midwest, when Minnesota introduced its charter laws in the early 1990s (California followed suit soon thereafter). Though still contentious as a form of market influence in education, charter schools have managed to garner more widespread support within and outside of educational communities. This is largely due to the fact that they constitute a public option and appeal to a broad range of constituencies who prefer more customized and localized forms of schooling (Fuller, 2002; Henig, 2008; Saltman, 2000). Additionally, less publicly-visible market-based reforms include the implementation of external contracts between school districts and for-

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profit providers of operations and administrative services (including school or school system management). As much as this extensive history of advocacy in favor of privatized educational mechanisms and reforms marks an impressive evolution of policy, it also marks the pathway of a more complex ideological conflict.

Although a number of stakeholders have inserted themselves into the discussion of privatization in the public education system over the decades, the argument essentially boils down to two fundamental perspectives. On one hand, the perspective in the affirmative represents a belief that traditional public bureaucracies are ill-equipped to respond to the demands of various aspects of the public realm, including education, health care, and commerce. That is, the government monopoly on services hinders innovation and competition, while it also supports large-scale inefficiency in resource allocation (Coons & Sugarman, 1978; Lieberman & Haar, 2003; Murphy, 1996; Walberg & Bast, 2003). Thus, public institutions—such as school systems—should consider a shift to a more market-based approach. Privatized demand allows for a broader consumer base, which gives way to a more responsive and diverse “supply side” and the availability of more dynamic services. Moreover, sliding performance on standardized assessments in comparison to other developed nations and sustained racial inequalities in domestic achievement are evidence that the public system is failing at the hands of government administration. As Chubb and Moe (1990) assert, if public education is ailing, privatization presents the panacea. The implication is that the state has thus far been ineffective, more so than the student.

The competing perspective critiques market reform as an attack on government institutions, but also as a disavowal of democratic values and equality. Critics of privatization argue that there is little basis to believe that markets are naturally better suited to provide the nation’s most critical public services. That is, from a technical standpoint, private-sector organizations do not consistently implement strategies that produce more effective results and services in these sectors than do public ones (Henig, 2008; General Accounting Office, 1996). Still, perhaps more important to the debate is the assertion that the fundamental principles and structure behind market reform are intrinsically at odds with the provision of public goods and the development of democracy (Apple, 2006; Burch, 2009). As a form of neoliberal policy, privatization reduces the role of government and emphasizes the will and preferences of individuals in acquiring goods and services within a market-driven environment. While this may sound benign (if not favorable) on its own, critics argue that the widespread implementation of such policy creates a society of selfish actors. Moreover, it detracts from the development of common democratic values and flies in the face of equality. Finally, critics of this approach argue that the market preoccupation with the bottom line detracts from the capacity to educate all students evenly and equitably. That is, privatization may work well for some students, to the extent that it is profitable, which naturally excludes students who are less likely to perform at high levels on standardized measures. Central among this population of students are those enrolled in special education, among others who come from disenfranchised backgrounds (Burch, 2009; Saltman, 2007). This final point speaks to a more fundamental aspect of the overarching debate within the literature: variation in the abilities and agency of students and their families.

Regardless of what the specific policy reform in question might be, the privatization debate sustains over time as a result of ideological divergence with respect to the locus of

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educational improvement. Incidentally, one key point of accord has been the idea that public education has largely been ineffective, particularly in urban areas. Nevertheless, there is hardly consensus as to why such a finding is even important. Politically conservative scholars often refer to losses in productivity, as well as the ability to compete intellectually and economically on the international stage (Coons & Sugarman, 1978; Walberg & Bast, 2003). More radical liberals may cite state schools' roles in the continual disenfranchisement of poor students and people of color (Bettie, 2003; Valenzuela, 1999). Political moderates call upon the importance of equity in access to educational opportunities and achievement, as well as implications for social mobility over time (Hochschild & Scovronick, 2003; Madsen, 1996). Further, it is not uncommon to find the first and third constituencies allied on the same side of the privatization debate, despite their differing motivations. Such vehement opposition over educational markets must have more to do with core philosophical differences than a mere clash of fundamentally opposed constituencies. As much as the introduction of different policy levers has galvanized the discussion over time, what remains at the core of the literature is the question of who or what must change, and who stands to benefit as a result.

Ultimately, this question within the present literature centers on either a neoliberal distrust of the state, or an egalitarian belief in public governance over the capacity of individual action. In perhaps harsher terms, this debate tells divergent tales of pathologies tied to schooling for disadvantaged youth. While the authors may not state claims in such explicit terms, their arguments do establish grounds for deducing the aspects of education that they believe to be at risk. As proponents of privatization, to distrust the state is to believe that the public governance monopoly lacks the capacity to provide quality education to a broad range of students. Thus, those proponents support reforms that focus on repairing institutional structures. Critics of privatization argue that neoliberal policies--policies that rely upon individuals to act and advocate on their own behalf within a market environment--do not suffice in meeting the demands and needs of students from marginalized populations (Apple, 2006). While most—if not all—of these critics are passionate advocates for rights and opportunities for disadvantaged populations, the implication of their critique is that these populations lack the capacity to navigate neoliberal structures, hence efforts must be made to assist them directly. This is not to say that they think little of or look down upon disadvantaged groups. Rather, the continual reproduction of systemic inequality has led them to question their capacity for agency within a system that has largely benefited those in society who are more well-off.

Thus, to summarize, supporters of privatization identify organizational structures as the primary site in need of reform, and change in structure will allow individuals to acquire better services for themselves. Conversely, critics believe that challenges at the individualized level take on greater prominence, such that mere structural changes are insufficient. My dissertation contributes to this conversation by imagining that educational administrative structures, student families, and everything in between are all part of a larger institutional field—or field. Hence, it investigates the extent to which the concepts of capacity and/or agency are complicated by dynamic conceptions of norms and legitimacy for all actors within the field. I utilize literature on institutional theory in order to lay the foundation for this investigation.

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### *Organizational and institutional theory*

In order to understand the utility of organizational theory in illuminating the national youth athletics landscape, it is useful to consider the institutional field in economic terms. Children and their families are essentially consumers on the demand-side of the youth sports market (Bourdieu (1990) refers to “entertainments offered to social agents...as a supply intended to meet a social demand”). Incidentally, authors on youth sports and its various sociological and societal implications have devoted most of their time to addressing the potential for demand-side reform and its impact on other aspects of youth life, including education. Nonetheless, to ignore the behavior of the “supply side”—or the institutions---not only negates an important feature of the larger picture, but also limits one’s ability to recognize the degree to which such behavior impacts and shapes the landscape of the demand side, as well as that of society in general. This is significant as supply-side institutions must satisfy certain technical requirements such as efficiency and cost-effectiveness (all the while retaining legitimacy). Organizational and institutional theories explain the ways in which these organizations mobilize to respond to and manipulate the structure of the larger institutional field, and how that set of behaviors informs national youth athletics landscapes.

Literature on institutions draws upon a shift away from emphasis on technical rationality to more normative and cultural-cognitive---or institutionalized—structures, policies, and norms. Early organizational theory has largely focused on the examination of organizational behavior in technical terms. That is, they discuss the ways in which organizations make decisions and respond to changes within their technical fields. According to Scott and Meyer (1991, p. 123), technical fields “are those in which a product or service is produced and exchanged in a market such that organizations are rewarded for effective and efficient control of their production systems.” Thus, organizations concerned with technical fields are concerned with developing and protecting the inputs and processes that lead to particular outcomes, and the achievement of organizational goals (Thompson, 1967). Institutional theorists distinguish this conventional organizational rationality within the technical field from the institutional field.

Whereas technical demands are more concerned with competition through efficient production, Scott and Meyer (1991, p. 123) define institutional fields as, “those characterized by the elaboration of rules and requirements to which individual organizations must conform if they are to receive support and legitimacy.” In contributing to this conceptualization, Lawrence (1999) writes:

The resources necessary to enact institutional strategy differ from those associated with competitive strategies: institutional strategy demands the ability to articulate, sponsor and defend particular practices and organizational forms as legitimate or desirable, rather than the ability to enact already legitimated practices or leverage existing social rules. (p. 163)

Accordingly, institutional theorists argue, many organizations will continue to develop and refine their structures and practices with survival as a priority over maximum profit (Barley & Tolbert, 1997; DiMaggio & Anheier, 1990; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Powell, 1987; Scott, 2003; Scott & Meyer, 1991).

Related research still tends to articulate the origins of institutional norms as stemming from formal actors (Lawrence, 1999; March & Olsen, 1984; Scott, 2003; Scott & Meyer, 1991). Scott (2003, p. 213) writes, “Theorists suggest that, at least in modern societies, the two major types of collective actors who generate institutional rules—cultural-cognitive categories, normative beliefs, regulatory policies—are governmental units and professional groups.”

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Thinking in terms of the education example, such a characterization excludes students' families and other community members as "rule-generators". Essentially, the argument for privatization is that the increased capacity for choice on the part of families will result in a paradigm shift in the delivery of educational services. That is, the institutional rules will change with the assertion of families' preferences, more so than at the discretion of formal public organizations concerned with preserving the status quo. This dissertation extends the research literature on the channels through which institutional rules develop within the field. The investigation of high school athletics as an institutional field constitutes a compelling case that identifies ways in which informal actors shape the landscape of the field.

Although sports organizations naturally take on various different forms with varying structures, there are certainly some commonalities that we see, particularly in cases of large, for-profit companies involved in various aspects of grassroots youth athletics. Such commercial organizations highlight significant theory in structure, strategy, and decision making. For example, when a firm like adidas determines at the executive level to expand its market share and increase sales in athletic equipment, it might determine to establish departments that focus on grassroots development. This becomes what Mintzberg (1978) calls a deliberate strategy, as opposed to an emergent (unintended one). Still, the decentralized goals and/or technical core of such divisions might differ from those of the executive leadership, and the degree of uncertainty in outcomes might vary by level. That is, while the overarching aim of the adidas firm is concerned with technical efficiency and profitability, its grassroots youth divisions might operate with an eye more towards satisfying institutional demands and increasing legitimacy.

While not the theoretical framework of choice for most scholars concerned with social justice, institutional theory serves an integral function in reconciling the many conceptual contradictions that constitute the modern youth sports field. On the aggregate, the institutional theorists mentioned above dedicate little time to race, class, gender, sexuality, or any other bases for societal struggles with hegemony. Nevertheless, neither classical socio-political theories nor classical economic theories suffice in explaining various incidences of incongruence and inefficiency. For example, the following section describes arguments from social theorists who assail black youth families for seemingly investing excessive time and resources in the athletic realm. Nonetheless, the evidence shows this behavior is most prevalent among well-to-do whites. Hence, institutional theory works to explain how this could be. Further, it illuminates how multinational corporations with clear profit-driven aspirations might divert greater resources to attracting low-income non-paying customers than it does to attracting wealthier customers who are primed to pay as needed. Such an occurrence is an example of a counterintuitive emergent strategy. That said, a theoretical lens that primarily lends itself to the investigation of research questions in an organizational and/or market context does not suffice on its own in addressing matters of equity. Hence, for the purpose of this investigation, an understanding of the sociology of sport is important.

### *Sociology of sport*

The majority of the sociological literature treating intersections of race and athletics does so almost exclusively in terms of a black/white binary. Consequently, in many cases, to review scholarship on racial participation in sports is to discuss the conditions of African

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Americans, and typically absent are any substantial narratives surrounding Latino American, Asian American, Pacific Islander or Native American athletes. The distinct position of black athletes in the fabric of U.S. culture has a great deal to do with their dynamic history, which includes a dramatic turnaround in terms of presence and prominence on the athletic stage over the previous century (Eitzen, 2006; Entine, 2000; Hoberman, 1997; Rhoden, 2006; Sage, 1990; Shropshire, 1996; Wiggins, 1997; Wigginton, 2006). As spectator sports developed in prominence into the latter part of the nineteenth century, so did solidify the exclusion of blacks from mainstream amateur and professional endeavors. Seldom disputed among these authors is the account of white boxers refusing to fight worthy black pugilists; the white-dominated Major League Baseball (MLB) excluding African American players, thereby necessitating the Negro Leagues, and blacks being excluded and/or segregated from amateur competition—particularly at the college level—altogether.<sup>4</sup> Still, the history of racial and ethnic conflict associated with modern American sport is largely rooted in the narrative of the immigrant of humble means. One landmark case in support of this claim is professional boxing, which has been marked by the excellence over time of Western European immigrants, Latinos, and migrants from the Eastern Bloc (Coakley, 2009; Edwards, 1973; Hoch, 1972; Wacquant, 2004), in addition to blacks. Another significant example pertains to the aforementioned professional baseball league, which actually welcomed Latin America-born players among its ranks prior to its acceptance of blacks (Coakley, 2009).<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, even in instances where non-black minority groups have prevailed in sport, they have sometimes been distinguished by the conspicuous absence of African American participants, in that professional boxing and baseball governing bodies actively excluded them at the outset. Today, youth participation in sport features much less differentiation across racial lines than the professional ranks.

While youth athletics are certainly comprised of significant proportions of white and black children, there is certainly more parity across groups across the board. First, the uncontested finding is that male youth of any ethnicity are involved in athletics far more (generally upwards of 15 percent) than do females ((NCYS), 2008; ChildTrends, 2006; Hedstrom & Gould, 2004; Pate, Trost, Levin, & Dowda, 2000; Sabo & Veliz, 2008; Services, 2008; Tracy & Erkut, 2002; Videon, 2002). Moreover, the studies find that, among females, whites participate at a greater rate than any other group. The most convincing studies in support of such a claim hardly constitute significant results: in a study of roughly 17,500 white males and about 3,500 black males (all between 7<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade) Tracy & Erkut (2002) found that 70 percent of blacks—compared with 65 percent of whites—reported participation in sports (significant at the 1% level [ $p < .01$ ]). This is still fairly narrow margin of difference, especially when one factors in sampling error. Another study of high school students approximates that 71 percent of African American boys play youth sports (either inside or outside high school), while 70.8 percent of white boys play (significant at the 5% level) (Pate, Trost, Levin, & Dowda, 2000). Finally, The Department of Health and Human Services (2008) reports that in 2007 roughly 65

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<sup>4</sup> Of course even more significant than the exclusion from athletic competition at these institutions is discrimination in general enrollment, which naturally spurred the growth of historically black colleges and universities, for both academic and physical exploits.

<sup>5</sup> While conditions for Latino players were less than hospitable at times, the relative tolerance of them in MLB in relationship to African Americans was such that some black players actually took to learning Spanish and taking on Spanish surnames so that they could play in the “majors”(Coakley, 2009).



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percent of black and 63 percent of white high school-aged males played on at least one sports team. Again, the numbers do not constitute a significant difference between white and black participation, though all three of the aforementioned studies find that both groups are involved in greater proportions than Latinos or Asian American youth (though they do place average youth participation numbers over 50 percent for all groups). As for the data suggesting that whites participate at greater rates than all, ChildTrends (2006) and Hedstrom & Gould (2004) are more involved at the scholastic and club level. Videon (2002) argues that it is difficult to develop a reliable measure of youth sports participation by race—in part because much of the estimation tends to be based upon analysis of the same National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS) data—but that there is a weak basis to argue that black youth are more involved in athletics. Nevertheless, with less than perfect data regarding the subject, race/ethnicity on its own may not be the most salient factor in patterns around participation.

### *Class and Participation in Sport*

Whereas there are clear racial markers in athletic involvement at the player level, class considerations are just as significant, if not more so. To return to the boxing example, while a litany of prominent professional boxers represented racial and ethnic minority groups, scholars assert that race and ethnicity may have been a red herring for class. Wacquant (2004), who spent three years doing ethnographic research in an inner-city boxing gym, submits that the history of participation in boxing has been marked by class status, such that one of the trainers he interviews remarks, “If you want to know who’s at d’bottom of society, all you gotta to do is look at who’s boxin’”. In that vein, those who assert the overarching importance of class in determining patterns of participation in sport, argue that—more so than race—socioeconomic status is what shapes the societal order, as demonstrated through sports (Coakley, 1987, 2009; Eitzen, 2006; Gruneau, 1975; Hoch, 1972; Lareau, 2003). Moreover, it is reasonable to suggest that class critique surrounding sport can be understood through two lenses: 1) a more Weberian perspective through which class circumstances in sport are viewed with a nod towards technical structure and overall functionalism; and 2) a more Marxist lens that describes involvement in sport as a function of power interests. With that said, to understand sport and society, the two do not have to be mutually exclusive. That is, one can understand the patterns around participation, management, and ownership as a matter of structure, and then lend an eye to an analysis of how that structure exists within a larger context of power rooted in class interests.

What makes socioeconomic status (SES) such a salient factor in the discussion of sport—from the youth level through the professional—is the fact that it appears to yield clearer and more statistically significant relationships. First, sociologists who study intersections of social class and sport find that athletic activity has historically been defined along the lines of wealth and status. While amateurism in sport is now discussed as a common symbol of purity, anti-commercialism, and low (or no income), modern amateur sport was initially developed as activity for the elite and bourgeois classes (Bourdieu, 1978; Coakley, 1987, 2009; Gruneau, 1975; Lomax, 2000; Smit, 2008; Wacquant, 2004). Incidentally, amateur sport was an exclusive sector, in that it was a status symbol for those citizens who had both the time for leisure and resources such that they did not require compensation for their participation. Thus, the earliest (modern) Olympians and collegiate athletes (at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were not men of

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particularly humble means. More than a century later, the SES dynamics have somewhat shifted towards greater participation on the part of lower-income people, however the demographic features of amateur sport have almost remarkably held their shape over time. For example, while access and opportunity has increased for certain low-income participants in a few of the nation's most popular and high-grossing (professional and collegiate) spectator sports, it still remains that a significant majority of amateur athletes come from middle and upper-income families (NCYS, 2008). Furthermore, the data on youth sports and socio-economic status are much less ambiguous than those pertaining to race, in that they clearly show a link between family income and participation (the latter increases with the former) (NCYS, 2008; ChildTrends, 2006; Coakley, 2009; Lareau, 2003; Videon, 2002).

To discuss a Weberian concept of intersections of youth sport and socio-economic status is not to ignore issues of hierarchical power and class interest, but rather it is to understand the functional organization of athletic institutions and participation. Ultimately, organized athletic initiatives require a variety of equipment, facilities, staff, uniforms, and other operational elements that can often lead to significant overhead costs. Naturally, those costs can be restrictive, and thus a litany of sports such as: golf, equestrian, tennis, hockey, field hockey, and figure skating become fairly inaccessible to those who are not financially well-off. Thus, academics suggest that with a more limited range of available options, people from lower-income backgrounds have over time focused their efforts on and enjoyed greater successes in the more low-cost sports such as basketball, baseball, and soccer. The cost issue is particularly significant when one considers that youth traveling teams in many of these sports—particularly those with high equipment and facility costs such as hockey and golf—can cost a family as much as \$5,000 - \$20,000 a year (Coakley, 2009; Lareau, 2003; Pennington, 2003, 2008). Moreover, in one of the few comprehensive studies where parent impact on student occupational motivations and aspirations is examined with race and class in mind, Jodl et al. (2001) conclude that class is the most statistically significant predictor of future goals. While they find that parents across the board care a great deal about their children's education, lower-income families—and particularly those run by single parents—are the most likely to list a career in professional sports as a potential path. Consequently, there is substantial evidence that supports the significance of class-based patterns in athletic involvement, which naturally leads us to ask what their root could be.

Class analysis through a more Marxist lens entails a more critical investigation of power, interests and intent behind patterns of athletic involvement. A key author who has taken on this topic explicitly is sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. In "Sport and social class", he describes spectator sport as, "entertainments offered to social agents...as a supply intended to meet a social demand", particularly for the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie (of a higher SES group, but not of the ownership class) (1978). Such an assertion seeks to explain the background behind the demographics of amateur athletics. In his analysis of Veblen's (1953) *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Gruneau (1975) concurs with Bourdieu's characterization of amateurism and entertainment, with the slight qualification that the bourgeoisie should not be confused with the aristocratic ownership class, as the former must ultimately submit to the ideals of the latter. Furthermore, Gruneau invokes Veblen's theories of bourgeoisie consumption as a means of attempting to demonstrate access to leisure. Considered in a contemporary U.S. context, Gruneau and others (Coakley, 2009; Edwards, 1973; Eitzen, 2006; Hoch, 1972; Sage,

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1990) draw upon this characterization of class so as to explain how a majority of consumers of the most popular sports could be from the middle and upper-middle classes, as they cheer on players who come largely from the lower-middle and lower classes, and who play for very wealthy owners. In short, the wealthy classes have been afforded the luxury of playing sports without obligation and viewing them as entertainment. Moreover, this line of argument provides one potential explanation of how it is that management (somewhat in coaching, but more so in administrative capacities) and ownership opportunities continue to elude those from more modest backgrounds, even when they have amassed ample capital or experience over time.

Ultimately, the theoretical frameworks around class and sport appear even in some ways more salient than those pertaining to race. From top to bottom, athletics are deeply woven into the fabric of U.S. society, and there are clear patterns of participation at various levels that are characterized by larger societal conditions. Nevertheless, while there is scholarship seeking to debunk myths about social mobility of the poor through sport (Coakley, 2009; Eitzen, 2006; Hoch, 1972; Lapchick, 1996; Sage, 1990), there is little work that seeks to pathologize low-income children's participation in and aspirations toward athletics to the degree that race has been discussed in those terms. Still, understanding youth sport requires more than just an analysis of the characteristics and behavior of children and their families. Hence, this study also includes analyses of organizational actors and various institutional phenomena.

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### Case introduction

The core purpose of examining youth sports in this project is to demonstrate the complexity of a youth opportunity structure that functions as a result of the interplay of a network of various individual and organizational actors. This study serves to illustrate how a basic area of youth life has developed into a more formally structured field, in which a range of constituents participate and work toward their ultimate benefit and survival. Additionally, an institutional analysis of this particular field suggests that such intense influence on sport does not merely occur among certain population groups who supposedly value athletics over education, nor do its machinations originate in the minds of misguided individuals. Thus, an analysis of the youth athletic field—even for two particular sports—must first describe the landscape of this field that has remain relatively obscured from the view of scholarship. On its own, this is no easy task, as the range of actors is expansive and it is difficult to mark the boundaries of the field. Nonetheless, the second charge is to investigate and draw conclusions as to how various actors come to shape the landscape of the field over time. In doing so, this study examines basketball and lacrosse as two sports demonstrative of larger institutional phenomena within the United States.

Given the fact that they are two different sports serving varying demographics, the comparative analysis of basketball and lacrosse is compelling for the following reasons:

- Whereas the faces of the elite ranks of basketball talent are typically black in the United States, the face of lacrosse at any level is unquestionably white. An analysis of the fact that both sports feature elite participation formats underscores the fact that this phenomenon transcends race, while allowing for comparison and contrast of behaviors across racial background.

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- Lacrosse has typically featured a wealthier demographic than basketball, which yields opportunities for class comparisons (or to eliminate class as a significant factor altogether).
- The fact that the two sports offer disparate potential in entertainment revenue and yet adidas (and competing firms) employs grassroots marketing approaches for both makes a compelling case for the existence of an independent youth athletic enterprise.

The irony of attempting to bound a description of the modern youth sports field—for any sport—is that among the most remarkable features of the environment are its breadth and depth. First, there is significant variability in structure between sports; thus, basketball and lacrosse are both components of a larger athletic field, but are driven by specific institutional demands and practices. Next, at some levels, the number of organizations and actors can be infinite, and even the quantity of different types can be vast.

Without being able to detail all of the actors in the field, it is useful to outline a cross-section of the field, based upon the institutionalized path of mobility from youth through to college-level. Although there is now a vast range of youth sports that offer a travel club circuit and elite summer showcase events, youth basketball—particularly on the men’s side—stands out as the most prominent. The combination of the elaborate competition structure starting from a young age, the high visibility of the sport domestically and abroad, the prominent professional pipeline, and the sheer commercial and fiscal appeal to a broad range of actors forms the basis for a uniquely intense phenomenon among a bevy of already-intense youth phenomena. Still, just as impressive is the organizational structure that sustains the basketball field.

Even in this rapid-fire information age, there is a disconnect between conventional wisdom and the present reality pertaining to youth basketball (among other sports). Despite the fact that basketball is one of the nation’s most popular participatory sports for children and that the elite recruitment infrastructure has been in place for over 20 years, its contemporary organizational model remains relatively insulated from the general public. In the traditional model, competition is rooted in interscholastic leagues and public recreational organizations, starting with the latter in the earlier ages, and transitioning primarily into the former as children move through middle school and into high school. Traditionally, basketball is a winter sport that captures the attention and loyalties of sports fans at all levels across the nation. As the weather in most areas tends not to permit any other sports to function, athletically-inclined spectators huddle around hardwood courts until spring re-appears. Marked by its low participation costs and overall accessibility, the sport has come to be known as one dominated by players from lower-socio-economic status backgrounds, and black males in particular.

The reality of the contemporary youth basketball model is that it is driven less by a culture of mutual exclusivity between academic and athletic aspirations of its participants (and their families), and more by a vast network of organizations and individuals that work in concert to make it as much an industry as it is a recreational field. That is, investigating youth athletics teaches us more about institutional theory and business than it does about ethno-cultural norms and variations in academic motivation. In the contemporary model, involvement in youth basketball does not necessarily call for the navigation of the linear pathway described above. More intense organized competition begins for many as early as the preschool years, and pint-sized participants might play on behalf of their local recreation center, church, school,

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or in large-scale events as representatives of their local city, state, or region. Here, basketball remains a winter sport, particularly when participants are not playing it during the spring, summer or fall seasons. An upstart 7th-grade point guard weary of trying to heat up a gym in the Chicago winter could suddenly find himself playing in a national tournament in Orlando in the spring, potentially at no cost to himself or his family. Participation at an early age is in many ways a sign of greater basketball aspirations over time, as starting in middle school for some might mean they're not prepared to compete at a high level, and thus will not attract the attention of college coaches. One of the most prominent features of this contemporary model is growth in importance of participation in travel clubs that play year-round, thus rendering the interscholastic season less significant (to the individual) in some ways than it had been in decades past. Whereas the high school season, for example, once constituted the bulk of the average competitive player's organized competition in a given year, a fully committed basketball player may now play upwards of 100 games over the course of a year, at least two-thirds of which will not be for his or her high school. Instead, the lion's share of their games will come from various competitions (particularly during the summer) in which they team up with high-level talent from their city, state, or even a collection of neighboring states to face squads from across the nation (and in some cases, the world). These travel circuits have expanded in a way that has increased exposure for youth participants, and generated a host of opportunities and benefits for individual and organizational (adult) actors.

As the potential for exposure and revenue increases, these actors naturally have fallen into greater competition with one another, which intensifies their strategies for institutional survival. Michael Jordan's ascent to basketball greatness did not just carry the entertainment level of the NBA to new heights, it also presented to business interests a landmark case of how an individual athlete could be marketed with his own unique product lines and advertising campaigns in a way that could yield seemingly limitless benefits for investors. The marketability of highly skilled individual players, coupled with the high popularity and visibility of the sport over the past several decades has created intensely complementary pressures at multiple levels (even as early as middle school) to identify talent that will not only win games, but also increase visibility for teams, leagues, universities, corporations, and everything in between. As a result, such intensification in competitive pressure has led these various actors to take great pains to find and recruit gifted athletes at the earliest stage possible. This has also led to the establishment of more regulations and governance bodies (i.e. the National Collegiate Athletic Association) to limit ethical (and even legal) improprieties. Thus, what most authors who seek to link a youth's participation in basketball with some academic cultural deficiency almost invariably miss is that in this modern era there are very clear material inducements (both short-term and long-term) with the potential to make deeper commitment from youth (and their families) more appealing. What's more, this culture of searching for elite talent allows various organizations to capitalize on the remote aspirations of many youth (of various backgrounds) and their families, thereby driving the growth of youth basketball as an industry. In this particular sense, basketball stands alone in the youth field, but other sports—such as lacrosse—certainly offer their own sets of incentives and motivations to participants.

Lacrosse presents a compelling case for comparison as a youth sport. It differs from basketball on many levels, and still there are fundamental similarities, many of which are rooted in the commercial elements at the foundation of both. If there is a disconnect between

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conventional wisdom and present reality in lacrosse, it is because the conventional wisdom in the national consciousness might question the sport's mere existence, when the reality is that it constitutes the nation's fastest-growing youth sport (particularly at the high school level). Invented by North American Indians, the sport—in its commodified form—has traditionally been a feature of the spring season, and its primary participants have come from privileged communities in the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic regions. Equipment costs alone (helmets, pads, sticks, gloves, etc.) pose a barrier to its accessibility for those with less financial means. Because of its less common popularity, the organizational structure for lacrosse has been less uniform across regions and levels, hence the club and varsity formats are both integral to its organizational structure at the college and high school levels.

Starting with the great variability in organizational structures and the lack of a thriving, prominent professional league, the path towards mobility in lacrosse is even less fixed than in the basketball field. The variability in structure likely derives from the lack of sophisticated and high-grossing formats at the college and professional levels. Major League Lacrosse is a low-exposure professional league with just a handful of teams, negligible revenue, negligible media coverage, and salaries that are miniscule by professional athletic standards. Thus, even those who do aspire to a career in professional lacrosse must ultimately do so out of an intense love for the sport, as conventional wisdom says they will not likely be able to support themselves for long in that vocation.<sup>6</sup> Without a stable professional league and high demand from a steady spectator base, the significant majority of post-secondary institutions do not sponsor varsity lacrosse teams (there are just over 50), though many do offer club squads. Additionally, as it is not what is commonly termed a “revenue sport” among the intercollegiate ranks, there are relatively few scholarships for lacrosse teams to divide among their players.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, as glamorous as “big-time” lacrosse is not—especially in comparison with basketball—it still offers one valuable incentive that ultimately fuels the current youth structure, and its accompanying industry.

Despite its negligible revenue potential as a spectator sport, even as a relatively uncommon youth sport lacrosse offers one clear premium to its most skilled participants: preferential admissions to a range of competitive colleges. In a college admissions environment in which the probability of admission at many institutions is decreasing, there is a lot to be said for any boost that prospective students can receive in the process. Even with scholarship dollars virtually absent for the majority of participants, the special consideration given to a student being recruited by the lacrosse team during the admissions process can make a world of difference in determining where he or she might end up. Thus, therein lies the incentive for families to invest time, energy, and money in the development of their children's lacrosse skills and exposure. Accordingly, the lacrosse circuit is taking on a form more akin to that of basketball. Students are playing on multiple teams, playing year-round, and participating in a host of regional and national summer events designed to enhance their aptitude and expand their opportunities to impress college coaches.

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<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, they will still have to develop an elite skill set in order to continue to play. Aspiring young lacrosse players can begin playing in organized formats not long after they can first hold a stick, especially in the sport's regional hotbeds.

<sup>7</sup> It is common for student athletes on non-“revenue teams to share portions of scholarships, such that coaches literally offer scholarships in the form of fractions.

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The lacrosse infrastructure is not as developed on a national level as in basketball. There is not an opportunity to play as many games outside of the interscholastic season, hence lacrosse players' participation for their schools is still the prominent form of competition. Nevertheless, as college recruitment is the pot of gold at the end of the proverbial youth lacrosse rainbow, there is undoubtedly an emerging market for various commercial actors to take advantage of increasing demand for equipment, services, and events that will work to give individual youth an edge over their competition in the race to recruitment. Naturally, these business actors work in direct competition with one another, but it is largely different in nature from that described in the basketball field. Not only is the revenue potential far greater and far more varied in basketball, but there are potential benefits to individuals, based on their ability to find and/or deliver talent to those who are seeking. In addition to the money at stake for college and professional organizations, this phenomenon is largely driven by the prospect of endorsements. There are no such prospects on the lacrosse side, and thus retail sales and event registrations constitute the primary revenue sources in the field. It is safe to conclude that the most enticing commercial revenue potential in the lacrosse field is actually nested at the youth level (particularly during the high school years), which makes it a compelling case of a privatized youth structure. Moreover, those with commercial interests in youth lacrosse are not after specific players, so much as players' (and their families') money.

The sector of sports organizations is one that is inherently competitive on several levels. Accordingly, organizational strategy and design are largely informed by the levels of competition and instability built into the market. Naturally, competition is a fundamental element of sport, and thus a similar level of uncertainty and conflict marks the operations of the corresponding organizations and the larger institutions in which they are nested. The same is certainly true for youth athletics. For example: a youth team wants to collect more talent than any other team in the league; a youth league wants to showcase talent and teams better than any other league in the area; if a league is part of a larger conference or regional body, that conference aims to field a host of teams better than others in the nation; a national organization pertaining to that sport seeks to gain a greater reputation and facilitate better competition than any other national body inside or outside that sport; the national organization tied to the corresponding Olympic body for that sport aims to field the most talented team possible for international play across age levels, while also developing the deepest possible pool of elite talent at the grassroots level; corresponding collegiate and professional organizations follow the aforementioned pathway; all these organizations are competing for profitability—or at least fiscal security—and are thus jockeying for the most lucrative sponsorships; the sponsors want the best sales numbers, as well as the best and most marketable talent to use their products and attend their events. With all this competition and potential for uncertainty in the field (if nothing else, the outcome of each sporting event is unknown), it follows that sports organizations—particularly the larger and more complex ones--must plot out their strategies and structures accordingly.

One indisputable feature of the fields in which youth sports organizations are nested is the fact that they engage in fairly sophisticated institutional fields, or networks, as a strategic means of survival. Whether it be a recreational team that needs another team to compete against, an association of high school coaches, a governing body for college athletics, or an apparel company to provide equipment for an entire league, there is a virtually unending

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network of organizations that depend on one another to function effectively. An institutional field, in this sense, is defined by actors (organizations and/or individuals) aligning their structures and/or behaviors with those delineated by the culture or expectations of a larger (formal or informal) network (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). As institutions form based upon familiarized behaviors and relationships, it is natural then that the members within them would be bound by the greatest number of common characteristics (Barley & Tolbert, 1997). For example, within the world of sports (both spectator and participatory) there is certainly a larger institutional field (e.g. one comprised of the NCAA, high school sports, governance organizations, the Amateur Athletic Union, corporate sponsors, and associated professional leagues). Nevertheless, each sport has its own, tighter field (even if it means that some of the more broad-based organizations such as the NCAA have corresponding sub-divisions) through which a script of institutional principles must be composed (e.g. rules of the game, revenue sharing, operation and formats of competitions, means of identifying young talent, etc.). Barley and Tolbert (1997) describe this process as institutionalization (the formation of patterns and relationships) and structuration (the incorporation of the corresponding “social rules”), and underline four elemental processes: encoding, enacting, revising, and replicating, all of which occur both formally and informally, but culminate in a set of consistent and widely enacted structures and behaviors. Once institutional norms are established, so is the proverbial playing field on which actors will collaborate and/or compete.

Organizations participating in a given athletic event can be thought of as forming an overarching institutional field. Those organizations comprise a mix of for-profit, non-profit, and educational entities. As they operate around a core purpose and format, each group has its own distinct objectives that drive its behavior. Consequently, it is natural to expect that the operational goals of each unit might appear at odds with one another. Powell (1987) suggests that such institutions still manage to function successfully due to the fact that their constituent organizations take on hybrid forms. That is, they are not wholly profit-seeking firms, nor are they wholly hierarchical organizations. As a result, such hybrid organizations might willingly concede some degree of efficiency in pursuit of more preferential organizational structures and internal relations, as well as greater access to external knowledge resources. Ultimately, network institutions provide space for a range of organizations to cooperate and exchange resources in pursuit of survival and a greater ability to adapt to environmental change.

While sports organizations naturally take on a range of forms with varying structures, through their interaction with one another they often assume some observable common—institutionalized—elements. This is certainly true in cases of large, for-profit companies involved in various aspects of grassroots youth athletics. “Grassroots” youth marketing refers to the creation of opportunities to promote products at a personal and interactive level, rather than just through advertising campaigns delivered through the media. Such commercial organizations are not just significant because of the degree to which they impact the general landscape, they also highlight significant theory in structure, strategy, and decision making. For example, when an athletic apparel firm determines at the executive level to expand its market share and increase sales in athletic equipment, it might determine to establish departments that focus on grassroots development. This becomes what Mintzberg (1978) calls a deliberate strategy, as opposed to an emergent (unintended one). Still, the decentralized goals and/or technical core of such divisions might differ from those of the executive leadership, and the



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degree of uncertainty in outcomes might vary by level. That is, while the overarching aim of the apparel firm might be concerned with technical efficiency and profitability, its grassroots youth divisions might operate with a greater focus on satisfying institutional demands and increasing legitimacy.

This project investigates elite youth sports events organized by one dominant actor within the field—adidas USA (part of the German-based adidas Group)—as microcosmic examples of privatized channels within larger institutional fields shaping both basketball and lacrosse. One significant challenge posed by studying privatized structures is figuring out how to set the constraints for such a study. The realm of interscholastic competition provides clear structural boundaries typically based upon region, school size, and school type, with significant barriers to entry. Thus, in studying interscholastic youth athletics in a given region, it is not difficult to identify the key venues, times, and infrastructures to follow. Conversely, the expansion of private structures has brought about weaker limitations and barriers to entry, be it on the side of participants or service providers. Thus, it is difficult to constrain an investigation of the private realm by region, for example, because top athletes from Northern California may spend most of their time participating in events east of the Mississippi River. One potential solution to this challenge is to investigate the private field as a function of specific, reputable events that draw on a broad network of actors and services. Apparel companies such as adidas, Nike, and Under Armour are particularly compelling because their primary functions as businesses do not directly involve the coordination of youth events, and yet they all are undoubtedly major players in the youth athletics field. They devote considerable resources to developing grassroots strategies to further their overarching revenue goals. As a result of the proliferation of the industry-wide grassroots strategy, athletic apparel firms represent the most prominent event sponsors across multiple sports. Accordingly, adidas USA has a rich history of involvement in grassroots basketball, and is aggressively pursuing a strategy to stake out significant market share through grassroots lacrosse. Hence, this study examines the development of institutional youth sports fields, as well as the larger implications for the privatization of youth structures, by exploring the institutional fields centered on adidas and its paradoxically elite grassroots events.

In focusing on one firm's elite basketball and lacrosse events, it is not only possible to uncover the firm's strategy in coordinating them, but it also becomes possible to illustrate the other key organizational and individual actors in the institutional field. This is important because although adidas may be sponsoring these events, it is not the sole organization shaping the format and overall position of the event. There are a host of actors who contribute to the construction of the institutional norms within the field, such that the actors and participants within it take it for granted. In observing the various adidas events during the elite summer recruiting circuit, there were many entities interwoven (both intentionally and by circumstance) into the underlying fabric. These include: male high school-aged athletes from across the nation and Canada; many of the athletes' parents and relatives; travel club coaches (many of whom volunteer or operate their clubs as non-profit organizations); representatives from event sponsors; retail vendor partners; college coaches (head coaches and assistants); NCAA compliance representatives; television and print media; online recruiting and scouting services; and even (in the case of basketball) sports agents. These various actors all represent a cross-

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section of the larger youth athletics field, and more importantly, they illustrate the varied elements that are taken for granted as being fundamental to these sorts of events.

This analysis is somewhat complex in that it examines privatization in the youth sports field as a case study for understanding privatization in education; it examines a single firm's elite youth events in two sports as a case study of privatization in the youth sports field; and finally it investigates the behaviors of and influences on the key actors involved in the events as embedded units of analysis within the institutional field these events work simultaneously to construct and reinforce. Accordingly, the intent is not only to describe the representative entities of these academically obscure sports phenomena, but also to explore the positioning of those entities in making these phenomena what they are. In linking this realm with the educational sector, it should follow that the market-driven dynamics of the former can inform the expectations of parallel conditions within the latter. This is not to say that the occurrences at a given elite high school boy's basketball or lacrosse tournament will necessarily predict the typical day at the local charter school or school site management firm to the detail, nor does this investigation purport to draw any inferences regarding resulting quality of life for the kids. Nevertheless, both realms represent youth structures that: 1) did not originate with underlying revenue and profit aims; 2) now constitute multi-billion-dollar industries; and 3) ultimately support two commonly promoted areas of youth development: education and physical health. Thus, examining the ways in which privatization now largely shapes the landscape of one structure (read: the mere fact that elite, privately-run boys high school basketball and lacrosse tournaments even exist) provides a look into how the landscape of the other might develop. More specifically, this project relies on analysis through an institutional lens, as it follows that a host of individuals and organizations interact to build structures that determine the experiences of the children within them (that is, the children tend to carry far less influence in shaping their experiences than do the related adults). The underlying assumption is that the private/market-based contexts present in both fields lay a foundation for common patterns of institutional behaviors.

As this is a study that seeks to demonstrate that—in addition to revenue-driven technical efficiency—the youth sports structure largely operates as the result of various institutional norms, the evidence presented should describe the larger phenomena that make this field distinctive, while also exploring the different actors and elements that hold these phenomena together. As elite summer events sit at the core of this landscape, it is reasonable to suggest that we can learn about the general field by investigating who and what are present at these events, why, and how they ultimately establish their influence.

### Methods

The data collection process for this project is bounded by the elite youth basketball and lacrosse events sponsored by the adidas apparel company during the spring and summer of 2009. In the spring I conducted pilot interviews with several organizational actors from within the youth sports enterprise, which afforded me a greater understanding of the commercial operations of the field. Accordingly, my preliminary observations occurred at an elite tryout event for middle school students, where those fortunate enough to be selected would advance to a highly exclusive national event in San Diego, where they would play top-tier talent and draw the attention of scouts across several levels. This preliminary data collection informed my

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research design for the investigation of the high school fields. Specifically, I learned about the administrative structure behind these events.

At the foundation of the evidence presented will be the observational data from three high school events. The data collection process featured observations over a span of multiple days at three landmark adidas events. I spent at least two days at each showcase event (I spent three the Las Vegas event), and each day lasted anywhere between eight and eleven hours. The information pulled from these sources will be critical in illustrating the aspects of the field that make the case compelling. Additionally, interviews and various event artifacts (such as media guides and parent letters provided by the event organizers) will help to triangulate observational findings.

I conducted interviews with twenty different actors, including: the adidas grassroots marketing directors for both sports (two for basketball, one for lacrosse); lead event coordinators for both sports (contracted to work for adidas); at least three basketball and two lacrosse coaches who have been associated with these events; at least four parents from either sports with children participating in the events; four college basketball coaches; and two authors who have written on the subject.

I used qualitative data analysis software to code the observations and interviews and record a range of responses pertaining to each of the four research questions. I paid particular attention to indicators of commercialization, as well as instances that explained actors' motivations and/or origins behind participation in these fields.

While none of these sources of evidence is sufficient on its own to make substantial generalizations, the case study format allows for the presentation of multiple sources, which combine to present a range of perspectives and explanations surrounding a particular set of experiences created for youth participants at these specific events. More specifically, the variety of sources allows for converging lines of inquiry (Patton, 2002; Yin, 2009) that examine the formation of the institutional norms that maintain these structures.

### Chapter 3—Who are the key actors in the field?

The four findings chapters that follow correspond directly with one of the four core research questions discussed in the first chapter. In sum, these chapters identify: the key actors in these fields; how they articulate their motivations and their involvement; the various technical and institutional demands that shape these actors' behaviors; and the nature of the responses associated with those demands. These chapters will unveil the various concrete organizational and sociological mechanisms driving this youth athletic enterprise, and thus inform the broader conversation around privatization and schooling.

This chapter describes the core organizational and individual actors present within this youth sports field. This is useful not just as a narrative exercise, but also as it speaks to the depth of the network of people, clubs, and firms operating in these market environments. Conventional wisdom might suggest that a youth sporting event comprises the basic elements necessary to operate events such as players, coaches, and officials. Nevertheless, this chapter describes the functions of five fundamental actors, among several more auxiliary ones: youth athletes (and their families), apparel company representatives, club coaches, college coaches, and a governance body that oversees intercollegiate athletics. Each of these actors makes knowledgeable and rational decisions about how to reach their goals in a clearly capitalist context. Finally, of great significance is the fact that the individuals described in this chapter represent a broad range of demographic backgrounds. More specifically, it becomes apparent that this intense youth sports phenomenon is not just an institution comprised of black or poor people. The implication is that participation in the field does not is not evidence of a certain group's pathology, but rather an opportunity to capitalize on a potentially lucrative opportunity structure.

The fundamental characteristic common to the five events comprising this case investigation is the fact that each had the adidas name attached to it. The adidas Super 64 in Las Vegas and the adidas It Takes Five Classic in Cincinnati are the company's landmark national exposure events for boys' high school basketball. The adidas Junior Phenom Camp regional event in San Pablo, California is a licensed middle school boys' basketball event, but is not organized or operated by the firm's corporate staff. The adidas National Lacrosse Classic Northern California Tryout in Palo Alto, California is the regional prelude to the adidas National Lacrosse Classic elite tournament in Boyds, Maryland, which serves as adidas' signature exposure event for high school boys' lacrosse. These landmark recruiting showcases sponsored by the firm represent tangible manifestations of its grassroots marketing strategy. Moreover, they constitute the physical sites where the various actors within these respective youth fields interact at the same time. As such, they provide an avenue to examine the implementation of the various institutional strategies and behaviors to go along with the narrative accounts in interviews. Additionally, these events are the loci of the apparel firm's profit-based youth sports operation, as they assess registration fees to all participants (though in the basketball case, these fees may be subsidized by various sponsors) and make various items and services available for sale and/or consumption on-site.

As adidas seeks to maximize the profitability and legitimacy of what constitute some of the nation's most prominent grassroots marketing events, they must include those actors deemed to be significant within the field. Consequently, these adidas events provide ample snapshots of what the market-based institutional fields look like for these youth sports. They reflect a range of racial and class demographics, as well as divergent market dynamics.

### Chapter 3—Who are the key actors in the field?

Basketball features national collegiate and professional leagues whose revenues lie in the billions each year. Lacrosse, on the other hand, and inevitably there are a host of opportunities to capitalize on this thriving industry, and countless actors willing to try their hand at taking advantage. Lacrosse, on the other hand, has a relatively underdeveloped intercollegiate system to go along with an underwhelming professional league (Major League Lacrosse), neither of which generates any significant revenue. Nevertheless, there are a host of benefits and revenue-generating opportunities at the high school level in each sport (albeit for different reasons) on which no shortage of actors—individual as well as organizational—seek to capitalize.

This chapter sheds light on the make-up of these institutional fields. More specifically it sheds light on which types of actors appear most prominent, particularly: student participants (and their families); the apparel company; club coaches; college coaches; and the NCAA (the regulatory body). Additionally, it details the function of each of these actors and how they position themselves to navigate the norms of the field in order to attain their goals.

#### *Youth participants and families*

As discussed in previous chapters, the conventional wisdom on the “big business” of college and professional athletics suggests that black and low-income males dominate the fast-paced, market-based enterprise, while white middle-class athletes fill out the more mellow and amateur circuits. However, amateurism is hardly the first word that comes to mind when one encounters elite lacrosse events such as the adidas National Lacrosse Classic. In today’s world of rising tuition and increasingly competitive admissions protocols, high school students with any collegiate ambitions have great incentive to find ways to a) set themselves apart from other students; and/or b) demonstrate a high level of talent in some arena that will prompt post-secondary educational institutions to agree to subsidize their tuition in some way (Farrey, 2008; Golden, 2006). For some, their angle is national achievement on standardized exams, for others it is classical musicianship, and for others it is lacrosse.

As the fastest-growing high school sport for boys and girls in the United States, lacrosse presents a strong mix of high opportunity for growth with few barriers to entry. A centuries-old game originated by Native Americans, for most of the last century lacrosse had mainly been popular in upper-middle class circles in just a few regions, including the Mid-Atlantic and the Northeast. In the past two decades, the popularity of the sport has ballooned, and sanctioned lacrosse organizations have become commonplace throughout the nation. Once completely off the lacrosse radar, California has experienced the most significant growth in number of high school lacrosse teams, and is now near the top of the list of states offering sanctioned organizations available to serve young players (US Lacrosse). As a result, young boys across the country are picking up the sport at an earlier age, and the field of play is becoming more competitive across the board.

The adidas National Lacrosse Classic (ANLC) amounts to a so-called national championship tournament in which 20 teams representing cities from eight regions throughout the country compete at a three-day event in suburban Maryland in July. Each team consists of 25 players who have been selected by the coaching staff of the team after participating in a regional tryout earlier in the spring. Thus, the team essentially constitutes an all-star team of young men from different high schools and organizations, who come together to challenge for a

### Chapter 3—Who are the key actors in the field?

trophy, strengthen their skills against stiffer competition, and, not the least significant, expose their talents to coaches and scouts (the event's tag line is, "Where will you be seen this summer?"). While there is no registration fee for those selected to participate in the ANLC tournament, all interested players must pay a fee to take part in the three-hour regional tryout event. The fee is assessed based on a participant's choice of one of two packages. At the 2009 event, the basic package was \$99, which included a guarantee of reversible jersey (to be worn during the tryout) and then a bevy of features provided at the national event (including a full uniform), if chosen. At \$149, the premium package included all the elements of the basic package, but also offered players a pair of adidas' signature lacrosse cleats. Choice of package is supposed to have no bearing on whether or not a player qualifies for the team.

At the Northern California regional tryout, roughly 40 participants came out to a public high school in Palo Alto, where the event was run by five coaches. About 90 percent of the young men appeared to be white, while two participants appeared to be of Asian background, and two more appeared to be Pacific Islander. They spent the majority of the three hours learning and performing in position drills, and competed in an un-timed, un-scored scrimmage for the last portion. Although most parents dropped their sons off without staying to watch the tryout, several sat and observed in the bleachers the entire time. Many provided drinks and snacks to their children on occasion, and they discussed a range of topics related to the event, ranging from the rules of the game, to how to get recruited, to what aspects of the event appear to be worth the expense.

At the ANLC tournament, 500 young men participated in the event, and all but a handful were white. Additionally, in the event program, which lists the names and personal information of each participant, all but 13 players had two parents' names listed. While this does not necessarily confirm much specific background characteristics about the participants, it certainly might suggest at least middle-class socio-economic status, as two-parent households tend to earn more. Additionally, participants and their families are responsible for their own travel, room, and board. As no less than 60-70 parents and family members were present at each game, one could conclude that the majority of players had family members in attendance, and that they managed to gather the considerable financial resources necessary for most participants to make the trip.

Each team is guaranteed the opportunity to play a minimum of two games prior to the commencement of a single-elimination bracket comprised of eight teams. Thus, as in the case of the Northern California team, a participant could conceivably travel cross-country with his family, only to be finished after two games. Meanwhile, players on the two championship teams (Rochester and Washington D.C.) were able to play in five games total, not counting the all-star game (in which those determined to be the event's best players could showcase their talents in an even more elite setting). This disparity highlighted the fact that the talent level in this sport is still largely stratified according to geography. The teams from areas where lacrosse has gained traction relatively recently (e.g. California, Minnesota, and Hawaii) struggled noticeably. On one hand, the newness of the sport and geographical imbalance dictates that the event cannot truly be comprised of wall-to-wall elite talent. On the other hand, a highly talented player in a newer region has an even greater probability of standing out. Ultimately the lacrosse participant and his family represent the chief consumer in the institutional field of lacrosse.

### Chapter 3—Who are the key actors in the field?

Whereas lacrosse is a sport undergoing rapid growth in participation and popularity among young Americans, basketball has been a staple of youth athletics—inside and outside of school—for the better part of a century. Moreover, there are well established pathways to revenue and various material benefits in the forms of prominent intercollegiate and professional infrastructure. Consequently, the nature of elite participation in the sport at the youth level is fundamentally different. While it is the nation’s most popular high school sport, the elite ranks of basketball are highly organized, incentivized, and ultimately commercialized. Moreover, although there are certainly traditional hotbeds of talent (typically found in the country’s most prominent urban centers), the game is played by people from all backgrounds throughout the 50 states and Canada, and thus the regional disparities in ability level in North America are essentially negligible. Once found, talented players face the prospect of receiving full scholarships to attend high-quality universities, and those select few who are extremely talented may have the opportunity to pursue relatively lucrative professional opportunities, either in the NBA or abroad. Therefore, to be a truly elite basketball player is to stand out among perhaps the stiffest competition in any sport, while also potentially facing the greatest potential material gains.

The adidas Junior Phenom Regional Camp in San Pablo, California provides a clear example of the pressures brought on by a high-stakes elite participation environment. Designed for high-potential participants from fifth through eighth grade, the event serves as a combination instructional camp/talent showcase/tryout. These young men and/or their families aspire to participate at the college level, and potentially beyond. For \$100, any interested young man of the qualified age may register to attend two five-hour sessions for one weekend, where they will take part in a series of drills, scrimmages, and mini-lectures on life skills and decision-making. At the March 2009 regional event, roughly 150-200 players turned out to be evaluated for the opportunity to attend the invitation-only adidas Junior Phenom national event in San Diego that summer. The San Diego camp is considered to be one of the premier national exposure events for elite basketballers in that age group. Thus, it came as little surprise that dozens of parents and family members sat on the sidelines surrounding the three courts in the gym, observing the activities from start to finish. This despite the fact that the event organizers charged entry fees of \$5 and \$10 dollars for youth (above a certain age) and adults, respectively (they also provided soft drinks and pizza slices for sale). In terms of racial background, the group appeared to be relatively mixed. Roughly 50-60 percent of participants appeared to be black, 25-30 percent appeared white, with Asians/Pacific Islanders and Latinos making up the remainder.

As mentioned before, the adidas It Takes Five Classic and the adidas Super 64 are the two signature brand events for elite high school basketball players in North America. Contrary to the Junior Phenom camp, these tournaments—termed grassroots events in reference to the apparel companies’ grassroots marketing approach—are comprised exclusively of team competitions at various age levels, for participants ranging from rising freshmen to rising seniors. Participants enter as members of private club teams, through a collective registration process. Unlike interscholastic organizations, club teams form based on much looser restrictions. Until recently, club organizations could form all-star teams to participate in national events, without consideration for geographic background or academic standing. Now, the NCAA has implemented a “Neighboring States Rule”, which allows non-scholastic teams to

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be comprised solely of players from the states adjacent to the one in which the team is based. As a result, participants may position themselves on a broad range of teams, in accordance with any number of affinities or affiliations. There will be more discussion on this later in this study.

Incidentally, with little way of knowing the socio-economic backgrounds of the players at these two tournaments, it was clear that the racial composition of the group was overwhelmingly black, roughly twenty percent white, and there was a virtually insignificant (less than five percent) number of participants from other racial groups. By multiple accounts (and observations), this composition diverges from the more diverse patterns prevalent at the younger levels (including that observed at the Junior Phenom Camp). As mentioned before, basketball is the nation's most popular participatory youth sport and is played by youth of all backgrounds, but is predominately black at the intercollegiate and professional levels. Even the interscholastic high school ranks are more racially mixed than the elite private circuit, which suggests that the It Takes Five Classic and Super 64 serve as more prominent feeders into the high-revenue infrastructure. CF, an African American elite club team coach highlights this point in more depth:

If you talk about the participatory part, it's a little bit of everything. If you talk about the elite players, you do start to see a profile of more African American kids, just because from a genealogy standpoint... there are certain gene profiles that predispose you for certain activities over another. I'm not built like a classic swimmer, just certain musculatures, my design. Certain cultures are built for that. If you're Norwegian, you might have more of a design, the more tall, lean, long torso, so I do believe the profile of African Americans playing basketball is a good fit because of some of the natural, more highly indexed gifts that we have. The quick-twitch muscle, the lateral-quickness, the stronger frame with less weight on them, that allow you to move a little easier. So I'm not uncomfortable with that as a term. I don't like the combination of, well you're athletic so you're not intelligent...and it's also access. For an African American that is an inner city kid, the ability to get a round ball, and take that ball to any playground or any elementary school and be able to go work on their basketball game, or just be able to work on their ballhandling in the street is easy. It takes a little more to play tennis, it takes a bit more to go golf, it takes a little bit more to go horseback riding. So, it's an easier sport for young people to pick up....

This passage from a highly successful club coach suggests the underlying expectation among actors in this environment is that black male athletes are best suited to compete and excel at the most lucrative levels. Moreover, comments from CF as well as the apparel representatives interviewed argue for a natural predisposition—be it genetic or sociological—for black males to dominate the game. Whether justified or not, this line of reasoning certainly engenders a particular dynamic of privilege for these participants. On the other hand, the socio-economic backgrounds of the competitors were said to be mixed, an assertion supported at least in part by the fact that dozens of family members were present at each game. Given the costs of transportation, room and board, one might expect the presence of families (particularly black families, who are stereotypically poor in basketball circles) to be few and far between, but that was not the case.

Ultimately, participants at the two tournaments had the opportunity to play at least two games before entering the elimination rounds, which provided them ample opportunity to display their skills. In many cases, teams played at both events, particularly the teams sponsored by the adidas company. Over the course of the summer, the young on men on the most competitive teams would play upwards of 100 games at events across the nation. Of course, the nature of their participation transcends technical ability, as youth and their families must devote energies and resources to conforming to expectations (as evidenced by club team participation and tryouts for special events).



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#### *Apparel company*

The most distinctive actor in the youth sports market field is the one at the core of the whole thing: the apparel company. As their primary function is to turn profits through retail and group sales, adidas, Nike, Under Armour, and Reebok, among others, have implemented grassroots marketing strategies to expand exposure to their products and broaden their consumer base. Accordingly, apparel companies dedicate resources to create their own events, allowing them to gather a host of influential parties together in one place and develop a viral marketing structure. While the nature of these programs varies by sport, each sport presents an opportunity to garner revenue, be it in the short term through event fees and on-site product sales, or in the long-term through successful endorsements, team contracts, and increased exposure, leading to greater retail sales.

With its United States headquarters based in Portland, Oregon, adidas has contracted with a marketing and distribution group on the East Coast to act as its corporate marketing arm for wrestling, field hockey, and lacrosse. More specifically, establishing this relationship in the mid-2000s allowed the multinational corporation to develop a grassroots infrastructure to promote its newly developed line of lacrosse apparel and equipment with twofold effects. That is, it created an institutional presence in the core region for lacrosse participation while positioning themselves to gain ground in a growing national market. This presence has come in the form of the adidas National Lacrosse Classic (ANLC), a national tournament held in suburban Maryland for the past three years. This is a comprehensive event that not only includes structured competition, but also college coaches scouting, on-site retail sales, food and merchandise vendors, college readiness and recruitment seminars, personal recruiting services (i.e. consultants and film technicians), media representatives, and facilities and support personnel. The main source of revenue tied to this event appears in the form of registration fees (between roughly \$100 and \$160 for every player who tries out) and retail sales, and the stakeholders within the sport only confirm that the supply of summer events is only increasing. Thus, it is imperative that the organizers of the ANLC remain vigilant about updating and improving the features of the tournament from year to year, so that they can maintain a steady consumer base. Moreover, the company must establish a reliable national network of partners who can promote registration for the regional tryouts as well as identify and recruit high-level talent to participate.

The comprehensive elite youth sporting events began with apparel companies sponsoring camps and games for the nation's most promising high school basketball players in the late 1980s and early 1990s. When retired NBA icon Michael Jordan signed a contract with Nike for a personalized shoe line (Air Jordan)—what would eventually become the most successful individual athletic shoe line in history—it became clear to the likes of Nike and adidas that there was immense revenue to be accrued by individual endorsements and promotions. Still, in many ways the executives at Nike had lucked out in Jordan's case, as they had been able to establish a relationship with him after he had already left college and declared for the professional draft. If the major apparel companies were going to compete with each other for the most viably popular faces for their products, they were going to have to identify those faces and develop those relationships a lot earlier in the process (Wetzel & Yaeger, 2000). Hence, they implemented grassroots events that would simultaneously increase brand exposure as

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well as lay a foundation as early as possible for exclusive business agreements with the most talented participants down the road.

The adidas basketball exposure programs occur at the same time as those of its primary competitors, during what is known as “Open Period” (as determined by the NCAA) in July. The It Takes Five Classic takes place at gyms in and around the University of Cincinnati (a contracted adidas university, of course) and hosts a couple thousand players and a few hundred college coaches. Later in the month, the Super 64 (largely a misnomer now, as the event has expanded to include well over 64 teams) tips off in Las Vegas, where a couple of competing events occur during the same week. Games take place at ten high school gyms (and one specialized basketball center) throughout the city. In an effort to create a stronger link between the sporting event and retail sales, the organizers have set up the registration such that all team participants must check in at the adidas retail superstore on the Las Vegas Strip prior to commencing any basketball activities. Additionally, for those who purchase a program book, there is a coupon for \$25 dollars off any purchase of \$100 or more at the retail location on the Strip. These basic strategies demonstrate how the company chooses to pursue its commercial interests, even as it goes to great lengths to orchestrate a large-scale comprehensive youth athletic competition, which requires considerable coordination.

Ultimately, it appears that adidas works to put on events at which its corporate presence is simultaneously ubiquitous and invisible. That is, all of the lacrosse and basketball events featured high brand visibility but adidas corporate personnel were not prominent figures at these events, even though they were in attendance (particularly at the basketball events). What is evident is that—from an organizational standpoint—boundary spanning as well as the development of a rich membership network of actors to act as their proxies throughout the country are paramount to the operation of the grassroots infrastructure. More specifically, one of the integral actors in these fields is the youth coaches who work intimately with the youth participants on a highly frequent basis.

#### *Club coaches*

For the better part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century the primary site for high-level athletic competition was the high school. However, as the century neared its close and grassroots events grew in popularity and accessibility, the opportunities to play organized sports year-round against the nation’s best competition expanded rapidly. Thus, the traveling club team became the chief avenue for young athletes to be able to compete in a wide range of formats nationwide. For example, whereas the typical interscholastic high school basketball season might last roughly 25-30 games during the winter, top-level club teams could end up playing upwards of 100 games over the course of the spring and summer months. As a result, the club team coach (also referred to as the “club coach”) has become one of the foundational elements of the elite recruiting circuit. DK, former Director of adidas Grassroots Basketball Marketing explains:

I think, number one, high school coaches, a lot of the time, they’re teachers and coaches. Their time isn’t directed 100 percent at coaching. I also think the level—one of the reasons why the AAU coach has a lot of control, in my estimation, has a lot to do with recruiting. That parent wants what’s best for their kid, they don’t want to pay for college, so I believe that they feel they need to expose them to the necessary resources that’s gonna allow them to get a scholarship. I think they believe that you gotta play with a club team, because obviously the club team—the talent level of club teams is a higher level, because it’s taking

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the best kids from the area, not just the best kids from the team. It's a higher level of basketball, or a higher level of lacrosse, or a higher level of soccer. I think that parents understand that that is the case. I know the a basketball coach would rather evaluate a kid—they'd like to see them play with their high school team, and a lot of teams the high school structure is more structured, and they'd like to see that—but at the end of day, they wanna see them play against the best, to get the best evaluation. So as a result of that, I think parents have given that control to the club coach.

Here, this corporate figure who has been instrumental in the development of adidas' grassroots marketing strategy explains that club coaches (also referred to as "AAU coach" in the passage above) have become more important figures than traditional high school coaches, because of the opportunities they afford aspiring young athletes. This assertion is underscored through observing their roles at these high-end events.

Because its national infrastructure continues to develop and expand, there is not a highly organized system for elite travel lacrosse clubs to compete nationwide. Incidentally, many interscholastic high school teams actually compete on the club level if they do not have the appropriate governance structure in place, but these clubs still have definitive restrictions (as opposed to those found on the basketball side). This more ambiguous dynamic in lacrosse explains the basis for the system the ANLC organizers have implemented in order to evaluate and recruit talent to the event. As mentioned before, adidas sponsors 20 regional tryouts throughout the US in the spring, which ultimately determine the rosters for the championship event in the summer. Each of these tryouts requires staff to oversee operations, as well as a coach to lead the team at the final event. Consequently, the corporate organizers identify prominent high school coaches, including at the club level, who can run tryouts, attract deep talent, and maximize the quality of the participants' experiences. JB, marketing director and lead organizer for the ANLC details the system:

The high school coaches are actually the coaches that pick the teams at the regional tryouts, so those high school coaches are involved as well. The high school coaches in the region pick the top 25 teams in the tryout. [The coaches] are contracted through Level 2. And the tryout is a canned tryout, where we specifically give them parameters so that they're consistent throughout. Skills, and 2-on-2, and half-court halves that they play. It's a consistent tryout that the coaches put 'em through. We give 'em, "Hey here's the tryout, but you pick the talent." This year the regional coaches can sign up for an opportunity to be selected as one of the regional teams, and then what we're gonna do is have the ability to give discounted rates to outfit that particular high school team.

Thus, it becomes clear that coaches carry a great deal of influence in the lacrosse market as well. In fact, the effectiveness of the adidas lacrosse infrastructure hinges upon the efforts and judgment of individuals who are not full-time employees. These regional coaches are in fact compensated with stipends, but the prospect of discounted equipment and apparel also functions as an incentive. This underscores the prevalence of competition and winning in the field. Without question, the coaches selected for each region have more contact with the youth participants and their families than any other employees or staff involved in coordinating the event. After running the tryouts and scheduling a few practices for the selected participants, they are charged with overseeing all on-site team operations at the tournament. They must balance the logistical and communication aspects required to deliver quality service to participants with strategic challenges such as ensuring that each participant receives ample playing time and organizing the team well enough to make it competitive on the playing field. Hence, the coaches are largely the driving force of the lacrosse event. On the basketball side, the responsibility placed on shoulders of the coaches is also great, yet there is a distinct dynamic in terms of how it is distributed and what the stakes are.

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Club coaches at the basketball events differed from those at the lacrosse event in that they outnumbered those in lacrosse by far and they operated as independent actors on-site. Since they registered their teams as independent entities and not as groups that had undergone an adidas-sanctioned screening process, they could devote the bulk of their attentions on site to coaching the games. This is not to say that some teams were not affiliated with adidas specifically. In the 1990s, apparel companies began to adopt a more aggressive grassroots strategy in sponsoring club teams on which they had targeted specific players. This meant that they would outfit the teams in cutting-edge (often customized) apparel and absorb the costs of travel, room and board, and event registration fees. Additionally, coaches of these teams could be compensated by the companies, by the families of their players, or—in the cases of the most high-powered teams with the most sparkling talent—sports agents. The adidas representatives refer to these as “contracted teams.” Thus, while these contracted teams could compete at any number of events throughout the year, they were certain to participate in the adidas signature events during Open Period. Still, even these teams were formed according to independent protocols. Nevertheless, club coaches face some considerable pressures during the periods leading up to and following the summer circuit.

Given the nature of the youth basketball club team infrastructure, the regional tryout model applied to the ANLC is incongruous, and yet adidas must still find a way to ensure that they identify the nation’s most talented players and attract as many of them as possible to their tournaments. This is where club basketball coaches become instrumental:

*Interviewer:* How do you build a network to ensure that you get proper coverage without having to leave Portland?

*DK:* I think history is very important in where the top players are coming from and who they play for. The interesting this is, the network, the fact that I’m calling the AAU guy who’s finding the kid, the fact that the college coach is calling the AAU guy who’s finding the kid, and the fact that the agent is calling the AAU guy who’s finding the kid, so that’s where it’s all connected. So the AAU become the foot soldiers, so to speak, and they’re the ones that cover the ground. The term, “AAU coach”, is really outdated. It should actually be “club coach”. It seems like the [AAU] is less and less prominent. It’s much more prominent at the earlier age groups. But at the older age groups it’s less and less prominent as the shoe companies gain more control and start having more and more events...

Even generally, the way it works is the AAU coach...often times we send out, with camps and the things like that, you nominate the best players in your area. Generally, they would know who all the best players are because they’re trying to recruit them for their teams. So they’re paying attention to who’s scoring the most for their high school games, or they’re going to their eighth-grade games. We do have them nominate their best players, but in today’s day and age, I don’t nominate, I look to the scouting services, and by talking to my guys.

This account is consistent with that of CR, a current adidas basketball marketing director who had headed operations at Reebok prior to re-joining adidas before the 2009 summer circuit:

*Interviewer:* How do you identify top talent?

*CR:* In each major city we have a person who have great relations with, who their job is to run a program. For example, [Club Coach] runs a program here, and there are 50 [club coaches] across the country, and their job is to have a pulse in his area. And if you take those 50 [club coaches], there’s also 20 or 30 independent people whose jobs is to go to games, go on the internet, blog about it, write who ranks this and that, and there’s 20 or 30 [Online Blog Directors] across the country, so you take what a [club coach] is telling you, and you go off what a [Online Blog Director] tells you, and multiply that by 40 or 50, and you have a bunch of input.

Thus, we learn that a single firm’s ability to identify the top talent it needs to eventually market its product hinges immensely on its network of club coaches, who locate elite players, notify

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corporate higher-ups, and bring them to events. Needless to say, in this system, those coaches with access to the most promising talent hold considerable leverage as well as the potential to access a range of attractive benefits. What's more, this holds especially true when considering that it is not only the apparel companies who rely on the club coaches to connect them with players, but college coaches as well.

#### *College coaches*

If apparel companies and club coaches essentially serve as mediators for youth participants in pursuit of higher athletic goals, college athletics constitute the Promised Land (as any substantive professional sports career would justifiably constitute the proverbial Hereafter). This is due to two key factors: 1) preferential admission and; 2) partial or full scholarships to hundreds of colleges in a highly competitive admissions climate and ever-scarce resources. On the other hand, college coaches—whether in the most lucrative ranks of the most prominent basketball conferences or the least-resourced Division III lacrosse programs—are charged with the formidable task of winning games. This charge is compounded when one considers that most athletic programs operate at a loss, and even the programs grossing the highest revenue typically struggle to break even (Sperber, 2001). Thus, winning on the field of play carries the most viable upside, and becomes the ultimate justification for the relatively generous compensation that so many coaches receive (with that at the highest level of basketball being far more generous than that for lacrosse)—they must win to support their livelihood. Further complicating matters is the aspect of college coaching that distinguishes it most from the professional level: the inevitable turnover of all player personnel due to graduation, leaving school, or simple attrition. As a result, these coaches must operate under a relatively rudimentary series of understandings: in order to maintain their livelihood, they must win games; in order to win games they must constantly maintain a high level of personnel within a context of high turnover; in order to maintain a high level of personnel within the context of high turnover, they must aggressively recruit new talent each year. The upshot is that these coaches end up acting not only as strategic leaders, but also as unofficial admissions officers, with the power to help skilled athletes gain tentry to their institutions. Thus, if they must aggressively recruit in order to sustain their livelihoods, high-quality summer events put on by third parties increase their capacity to work toward those ends.

With the ANLC being a relatively new event, its staff has had to work hard to demonstrate that it is a tournament worthy of college coaches' precious Open Period time and financial resources. Given just a month to evaluate countless high school players throughout the nation and a limited staff, coaches attend events where they can see the greatest number of college-level players in one place. Accordingly, the ANLC consists of various features intended to attract coaches, such as the provision of special sitting areas adjacent to the field from which they can observe (closer to the field than any other seats), a hospitality tent—where they can sit and eat catered lunches, snacks, help themselves to bottled water, and view the master tournament bracket, updated in real time—and an all-star game comprised of the best participants from each region, so they can observe the most talented prospects on the field against the stiffest possible competition. At the 2009 event, the time constraints placed on college coaches became apparent by the second day of tournament play, when it appeared that at least half those in attendance had left to attend showcase events in other cities.

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Another challenge endemic to the work of the lacrosse coach is the limitation of athletic scholarships available. Lacrosse does not gross enough revenue for each player on a given team to receive a full scholarship, if they receive any aid at all. Moreover, many of the strongest lacrosse programs come from the Ivy League and other conferences that do not offer athletic scholarships. On one hand, this means aspiring players will have to balance high academic achievement with exceptional play, all with modest expectation of financial support. On the other hand, the paucity of scholarships, coupled with the high academic quality of many of the schools, creates a dynamic such that coaches often over-recruit players, as they must anticipate a higher attrition rate due to the fact that so many student athletes are not bound by any scholarship contract after they are admitted, and will this quit the team to focus on school (Golden, 2006). Consequently, lacrosse coaches are simultaneously seeking out quality as well as quantity. On the other hand, college basketball coaches have more resources at their disposal, but also operate in a more intense environment.

The first thing anyone who attends an adidas high school basketball event will notice upon arriving at the gym is the separation of entrances. For basketball, in addition to enforcing the Open Period, the NCAA strictly forbids any contact between college coaches, players, and their families. Thus, event organizers must take great pains to minimize the degree to which coaches can potentially end up in a position where they might be committing a violation. There is one entrance for student participants and their club coaches, where they check in and show their badges granting them access to that area; there is another entrance for families and general spectators, where they pay their admission fees or show their day passes; and finally there is an entrance for coaches and media, where coaches (usually at least 2-3 from each school's staff) pay admission for each coach on top of \$150 each for a tournament program and receive their badge granting them access to specific restricted viewing areas.<sup>8</sup> At the It Takes Five Classic, several private event staff and security staff were positioned throughout the gym to ensure that all those in attendance did not stray from their designated sections. At the Super 64, the organizers elected to forego the formal security staff and relied on cordoning off seating areas with caution tape. Even with these precautions in place, the director of the Super 64 event remarked that he was aware of at least a few demerits issued by NCAA compliance representatives to college coaches for violations. The marked difference in enforcement of NCAA policy between lacrosse and basketball (coaches were not allowed to have contact with players at the lacrosse event either, yet there was little done to create clear boundaries between the parties) is underscored by the intense competition that shapes this field.

With hundreds of coaches (well over 300 at each event) present to evaluate a couple thousand players, it is clear that there is serious competition among the coaches to either: a) find talented players before their counterparts do; and/or b) recruit talented players and convince them to commit to their programs as early as possible. At the same time, if one watched coaches observe the games and evaluate the participants, he might conclude that they were less competitors than they were fraternity brothers. Most coaches are former players, many of them have worked at multiple schools, and thus many know each other and socialize,

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<sup>8</sup> The program lists each team's roster, complete with each player's name, height, position, hometown, school, phone number, and email address. Incidentally, the same program for which the coaches pay \$150 is made available to the media, free of charge.

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regardless of school affiliation. At various times during the two events, coaches could be heard comparing notes on upcoming recruiting showcases and on different players, and some even offered to provide contact information for potential recruits. One assistant coach from a Division I school in the South—when asked about how collegial and helpful he and others had appeared to be—remarked that ultimately they are all in heavy competition with one another, “...so we’re talkin’, but ain’t sayin’ nothing to each other.” As many of the top head coaches pull in salaries numbering in the seven figures and most earn at least six figures, they stand to lose a great deal if they are unable to field winning teams, and hence unable to retain their jobs. Moreover, the aforementioned turnover challenge is further exacerbated in basketball by the prospect of a professional career. Aspirants to pro basketball contracts need only spend one year out of high school prior to entering the NBA draft. As a result, it has become increasingly common for college teams’ best players—especially those in the most competitive conferences in Division I—to depart as underclassmen to try their hands at playing for a salary. Such dramatic change in a team’s composition can lead to an equally dramatic change in fortunes.<sup>9</sup> A team that is of championship caliber one year can find itself mediocre at best the next. Thus, one might infer that there is reasonable incentive to risk minor violations in pursuit of a class of players who could carry their program to the top of the standings, particularly if the prospect of a full scholarship offer is an expectation more than it is a bonus for most talented players. Accordingly, the NCAA establishes a presence in the recruiting infrastructure to compel all actors involved to play by the rules.

#### NCAA

The National Collegiate Athletic Association is much like adidas corporate in that they are simultaneously invisible and omnipresent, with the primary difference being that one is largely hard pressed to find any physical evidence of an NCAA presence. In fact, were it not for the mandatory video that all youth participants were required to watch at the adidas events, one might conclude that the NCAA had little to do with these activities.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, NCAA regulations are the bedrock of these grassroots tournaments. First, the “open period” (otherwise known as the summer evaluation period) is in place to limit the period of time during summer in which college coaches can attend events and evaluate athletes attending high school in the coming fall. Although there are various competitive leagues and tournaments that take place in both sports over the course of a year, those that can bring the greatest number of elite players together in one venue will attract the greatest number of high-level coaching staffs who will pay handsomely for entry as well as information guides; and those that can bring the greatest number of high-level coaching staffs will inevitably attract the

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<sup>9</sup> To illustrate this point, the 2009 NCAA National Champions, the University of North Carolina Tar Heels lost several key players and ended the 2010 regular season not ranked in the top 25, and at the time this study was written were at serious risk of missing the 2010 NCAA Championship Tournament (otherwise known as March Madness). Additionally, from 2007 to 2009, the Pac-10 conference sent 60 percent of its teams to the tournament. In 2010, after two years where it lost 15 early entrants to the NBA the conference is projected to only send one team, marking the first time one of the major conferences (Pac-10, ACC, SEC, Big East, Big 10, Big 12) has produced just a single team in 25 years.

<sup>10</sup> All participants must watch a video produced by the NCAA that encourages student athletes to practice sound decision-making and warns of potential ethical pitfalls they might encounter during the recruiting process as well as after they arrive on a college campus.

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greatest number of exceptional teams and players who will pay registration fees, buy merchandise, test products, and market those products to their peers. Thus, any truly premier youth event must occur during Open Period. Second, as mentioned before, there are strict rules pertaining to when and how coaches and players (and their families) may interact, both on and off site. As a result, event coordinators must take all necessary steps toward compliance, and the NCAA sends representatives to the events (particularly those for basketball) to monitor potential violations and issue citations in cases of non-compliance.

Relative to the actors previously discussed, the governance body does not stand to gain a great deal of direct benefit from this elite youth sports infrastructure. Its staff do not have any scholarships, shoe deals, or six-figure incentive bonuses to look forward to if the adidas events operate successfully. Hence, it might seem peculiar that the NCAA would go to such great lengths to influence these summer activities that are not even intercollegiate competitions. Still, as a textbook example of a cartel, the it must simultaneously maintain competitive balance among its members, as well as protect the amateurism of its athletes, all of which support its tax-exempt status as a multi-billion-dollar non-profit organization (Zimbalist, 1999). Thus, in order to maintain its influence, the NCAA introduces various institutional norms in the form of requirements for event certification that tie together the legitimacy of all actors in a given sports field. With all that said, to speak to their omnipresent invisibility, despite the Super 64 event coordinator's claim that they sustained a rotation of three compliance representatives on-site at all times, I never managed to spot a single one at any event.

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**Figure 1.** Diagram of prominent actors within institutional field (core actors in bold).

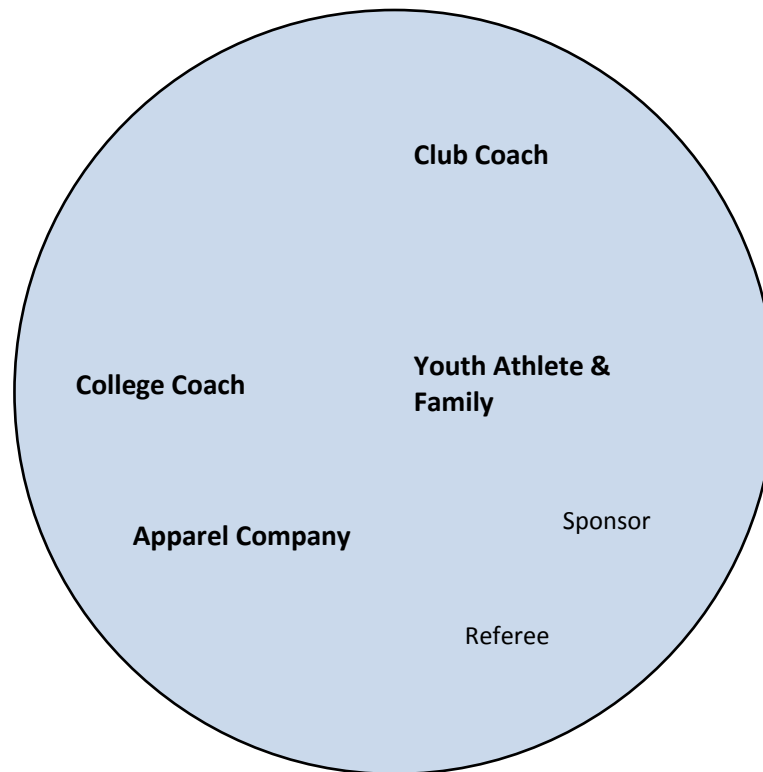
Vendor

Media

**NCAA**



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There were numerous auxiliary actors who appeared at the adidas events that were either essential to the operation of the event but not to its mission, or core elements of its mission but not intrinsically necessary for its successful operation. For example, referees were clearly instrumental in carrying out these events successfully; there were at least two referees present at each game in either sport, and the premier basketball matchups were staffed by three officials each, to replicate the format at the college level. In fact, the Cincinnati event featured professional development for the referees, coordinated by an outside organization. Yet, not a single person interviewed mentioned referees as integral to the environmental network. On the other hand, all but one adidas representative and several parents interviewed mentioned recruiting and ranking media websites as key actors in the field, despite their understated presence on-site, and the fact that they do not provide any service that necessarily supports the intrinsic function of the events. External food and merchandise vendors, sports news media, sports agents and other high-profile individuals fit into this category as well. Finally, though visible on or around the playing field, the referees, security staff, hospitality caterers, and certain sponsors fall into that group. In the end, these auxiliary actors function more as service providers than core figures in youth sports fields.

Ultimately, the key actors in these two sports' institutional fields all appear to act in two capacities—as consumers and as sellers—alternating between providing a service or benefit to one group while simultaneously seeking the same from another (e.g. college coaches selling their programs to promising recruits while paying apparel companies and other event organizers for the opportunity to see them play). It is clearly a highly commercialized, market environment in which each set of actors is pursuing its own distinct interests. Nonetheless, this

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market dynamic runs counter to conventional images of disadvantaged families with “pipe dreams” of attaining fame and fortune through athletic prowess. Still, as much as each is concerned with individual benefit such as profit maximization, social mobility, salary bonuses, and winning games, their behavior is also motivated by a quest for legitimacy. The following chapters will discuss the various goals for the key actors in these fields, as well as the mix of technical and institutional demands they face in pursuing them.

## **Chapter 4—How do the core actors describe their central motivations pertaining to participation within the field?**

In an attempt to understand the implications of a youth sports field rooted in a market context, it is not enough merely to assume that all the core actors function to maximize revenue or their economic wellbeing. While financial considerations are absolutely integral to understanding these environments, it is also important to recognize underlying nuances in various goals, as well as the assumptions that certain actors hold during their interactions with others in the field. This chapter explores the articulated motivations of and operational context surrounding several core actors involved in the youth sporting events. More specifically, it examines interview data and observations of the apparel company, youth participants, and coaches.

It is worth noting that it is generally very difficult to uncover the motivations of any research subjects completely, as what they say may differ from what they believe. Nevertheless, examining narratives centered on these various actors' supposed rationales behind their participation lends considerably more depth to a youth sports conversation that has often centered on stereotypes and misconceptions. For example, some academic literature—including works cited earlier in the literature review chapter—describe black or “urban” youth as motivated by dreams of fame and fortune through professional careers. Aside from the fact that it obscures the realities and appeal of athletic participation for young people, such a description also pays little attention to other individuals and organizations who invest so much time, energy and money to participate in this environment. Nevertheless, the degree to which actors' articulated motivations are genuine is actually of less consequence. It is more useful to understand the narratives of participation in this field that have been institutionalized. This chapter ultimately constructs the landscape of this common narrative.

### *Youth participants and families*

As reviewed in the literature earlier in this study, most of the work on youth athletics has been rather unsophisticated, in that it has focused on the actions and interests of the youth participants and their families, and less on the organizations and structures in which they participate. This is problematic, not only in that it negates the significance of other actors such as those discussed in the previous chapter, but also in that it largely ignores the context that shapes the motivations of these participants. The adidas elite recruiting showcases highlight the nuances of participation, as well as the various ways in which the various actors within these fields perceive and respond to participants' motivations. Parents cited a litany of goals for participation, ranging from athletic skill development, to personal social skill development, to access to higher education and related subsidies.

Ultimately, each parent interviewed at these events—in either sport—shared the common goal of wanting their son to excel on the field of play among elite competition, and be able to play as long as he could beyond high school. Despite the fact that they understood the odds as not in their favor, each believed that taking part in these highly organized national events was an effective means towards those ends. Still, what is important to understand in this case is that these parents neither considered nor described their behaviors in a manner that suggested they were chasing an elusive dream. Rather, they appeared to be pursuing rational courses of action that reflected their genuine concern for their children as well as a desire for their children to access greater opportunities in a highly competitive environment.

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With all the ambitious aspirations towards academic and/or socioeconomic mobility, just as fundamental to these parents' participation goals for their children were the assumed benefits to the youths' personal character development. That is, they largely believed their children's participation in these highly developed sports infrastructures would make them better people, or at least more able to get along with other people. Incidentally, while each parent pointed to the importance of their child genuinely enjoying their time spent in these highly competitive activities, there was some distinction in perceived personal benefits based on the sport.

On the lacrosse side, each parent invariably pointed to developing skills as extroverts. SS, a white mother from Virginia who actually played Division I lacrosse in college, spoke to interaction with others as a key element of the experience: "Our goal for him is to develop healthy habits, leadership and skills on any team he plays on... I want my child to experience excellent coaching that includes character development and leadership opportunities." TA, a white mother from Long Island mentioned that one of the most valuable aspects of her son's time spent playing club lacrosse year-round was the fact that he could "build relationships with people from other states and towns." Finally, MM, a white father from the North San Francisco Bay Area reported that one of the primary goals for his son's participation was to learn how to work with other people, and noted that his time spent playing had "...certainly opened up a lot more social activities with people. You know, he's gained some respect from his peers." Hence, these goals appear centered on the development of social relationships and leadership skills.

It is significant that the lacrosse parents speak largely from a perspective of financial investments they are making, while the majority of activities in which these basketball families are involved are subsidized by some combination of sponsorship and private fundraising. Thus, while it would not be surprising to find that all parents in both sports thought it important to develop leadership qualities, there is no question that one field offers more immediate and attractive incentives for individual success than does the other (there will be further discussion of this idea in later chapters). Still, none of these parents was far apart from the other in terms of their expectations for their investment of time and resources in this highly competitive market infrastructure.

If there is one expected outcome from playing in these market-based elite sports fields that is intrinsic among all parents studied, it is that they will grant their sons access to participation at the college level. Further, all key actors in these fields operate under the assumption that this was the primary goal. Even without conducting a single parent interview, one could conclude that these elite adidas events represent a clear meritocratic pathway to higher education access. Ironically, the presence of college coaches at the ANLC was relatively understated, yet there was a palpable parent concern with recruiting opportunities for their children. There were indeed special seating areas and a hospitality tent, but at the same time there was little fanfare for these gatekeepers to higher education, as they were able to move freely throughout the various playing fields, and in many cases blended in remarkably with parents and others in attendance. Nevertheless, throughout the course of each game, parents could be heard trading tricks of the trade and war stories regarding their adventures in attempting to attract the attention of college coaches.

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One parent on the sidelines from the Boston team explained to another that his older son was already playing lacrosse at Williams College, so he was familiar with the process (naturally, the listening party responded with a barrage of question about how it all works). Some were even so bold as to walk directly up to college coaches (a supposed violation) and engage them in conversation. Additionally, an online recruiting service, *thecoacheseye.com*, operated a booth next to the registration tent in the vendor area in the parking lot. Thus, it was clear that while the physical layout of the event was not built around college coaches and recruiting, the prospect of college recruitment firmly constituted its foundation. In stark contrast with the ANLC, college coaches and recruiting services at the basketball events were prominently on display. Parents at the It Takes Five Classic in Cincinnati settled for the worst seats in the house, as the hundreds of college coaches in attendance watched from floor seats and the glass-walled hospitality suite just above the courts. Parents at the adidas Super 64 often were relegated to one side of the gym, with a clear view of some of the nation's most prominent coaches filling out the other side. Those who ventured into the lobby of the event's main gym could sign up with *videochamps.com*, another online recruiting service that allows aspiring players to market themselves to college programs. All this is to say that in many ways these events catered to the needs and comforts of college coaches—at times over those of the players and their families—but that this was acceptable practice because the attraction to college opportunities was so great. Parent interviews confirmed as much.

Parents interviewed at the ANLC were not shy about indicating the importance of recruitment opportunities. SS explains:

[Her son] wants to play at the college level (either Division-I or Division-III) and knows what he needs to do to get there, including playing on a travel club team and trying out for tournaments such as adidas...I see the high school team experience still being important but the club and travel team are becoming more important for kids who want to get the attention of a D1 coach.

TA shares that while the various features offered at showcase tournaments (such as recruiting seminars) were nice, the most important element was exposure: "Seminars aren't that important [to structure of events]. You hope they have coaches here to watch the games." In speaking to the exposure theme, MM also notes the benefits in terms of equity:

So if you're not from a big name program you're not gonna get the looks, 'cause everybody talks to each other--with these little tournaments there's a lot of crossover, so if you go to a lot of tournaments you have better visibility and more chances, but I think that's the case in most of the sports...The parents want to get their money's worth out of a) skill development; and b) if there's networking opportunities that might further his connections within the sport, because pretty much a lot about connections, who you know, and how to gain some more information about who you might run into later on as far as a coach, or a school down the road.

These excerpts underscore the great significance that parents place on their children getting the opportunity to play in front of college coaches, who might see them and offer them a spot at their schools. The implication is that rather than be an avenue towards developing proficiency in the sport, these parents expected that events such as the ANLC should generate opportunities for their already-proficient sons to leverage their talents for rewards. Also striking about this emphasis on exposure is the suggestion that the lacrosse market may not offer a clear-cut set of choices of national events that players and their families can be sure will yield the optimal level of competition and college coaches. JB, one of the lead ANLC coordinators confirms: "Kids will come if they know the college coaches are there. So the two key constituents that we really need to keep happy, to try to meet their needs, is the

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participants and the college coaches.” SS, whose son received phone calls from several coaches after participating in the ANLC, details how their family has gone about pursuing the most valuable events through trial and error:

*Interviewer:* Do most of the organizations you come across offer similar services and structures? Are there any in particular that stand out? If so, what is distinct about their structure?

SS: I can speak to the ones we have participated in: Top 205 is too big, over 400 players and not a good venue for a kid to be seen---also expensive (\$500-plus). Blue Chip: if your son doesn't go and play well at the rising junior Blue Chip, then you won't get much attention from the top schools. Our son missed the summer before his junior year (after attending Top 205) due to injury, and the next summer he went to rising senior Blue Chip. This was not very helpful in terms of recruiting as all the top schools had already filled their class, but my son enjoyed it and gained some good confidence. There was no coaching at either Top 205 or Blue Chip. Finally the Adidas tournament was very positive--affordable (only \$200), good coaching, excellent venue, excellent play—overall the most positive.

Again, lacrosse parents approach summer events from the perspective of consumers in search of the product that will grant them ample college access, as well as the best bang for their buck. What's more, while they have high expectations for college recruitment, it is clear that they hold very little expectation for their children to receive athletic scholarship offers. Incidentally, the basketball parents interviewed—despite the fact that their sons' participation were highly subsidized—still held high expectations for their time investments in elite participation channels. Moreover, independence and personal responsibility emerged as more significant than development of social interaction skills.

Whereas only one of four basketball parents interviewed pointed to leadership as a core goal, this group was definitely more enthusiastic about more internal outcomes, such as independence. CM, a black father from Atlanta, whose son is ranked as the 34<sup>th</sup>-best player in the Class of 2010 and had already committed to the University of Tennessee by the summer of 2009, measured the success of his son's basketball participation by level of discipline, impact on school work, and the observation that he exhibits more self control and more focus in various aspects of his life. Moreover, he went on to say that his son is "maintaining a high-B average, and that's because of basketball." PH, a black mother from the East San Francisco Bay Area, goes so far as to say the travel club system in particular has been beneficial to her son's character development:

*Interviewer:* How would you compare the value of the AAU/travel experience with the interscholastic experience?

PH: I think it's very helpful. It teaches them independence. It teaches them responsibility. And I think it's very good for them, or for my son. Traveling, you know, you have to be timely. You gotta travel right, you even gotta keep yourself healthy. I tell Casey all the time, time management. You gotta make sure you eat well, you gotta be on time, you gotta make sure you have your things packed properly, and you have to be ready to display your skills at any minute.

Here we see these parents expressing concern about their children's ability to get things done on their own, which projects to their long-term goals for college and career. As the two aforementioned examples come from black parents, one might wonder if the difference in goals was more based on race than sport. The two other basketball parents in this study were white fathers from far-out suburban areas in the San Francisco Bay Area, and both pointed to goals of building capacity for individual skill development and achievement over improved interactions with others. Moreover, more than race, the variation in potential benefit within these two sporting fields—that is, the variation in market and material outcomes—likely

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accounts for distinctions in the articulation of goals. This chapter reports the responses of parents in two groups, which allows for comparison of their motivations but also lays the groundwork for identification of commonalities. It relies on field observations and firsthand interview data and incorporates supporting accounts from the other relevant actor groups.

In the basketball field, participants and their families appear to be more confident about where to allocate their resources and how they might expect their sons to be recruited. These young men play dozens of games throughout the spring and summer at tournaments scattered throughout the nation. The most prominent events are already well established, and all actors in the field have a better idea of what to expect from them. As a resident of the Central Valley, GS discusses how his son's commitment to playing on an elite team based in the South Bay Area is critical to his pursuit of a college roster spot:

*Interviewer:* Has the college recruitment and scholarship piece become a clear goal?

GS: Oh yeah, he's getting tons of phone calls from people. I just got a call from the Naval Academy and stayed on the phone with an assistant coach for 15 or 20 minutes.; tons of Ivy League schools; University of the Pacific. He's gotten quite a few different schools since I've been calling them and coming out to watch him play. He wouldn't have gotten those kinds of looks if he hadn't been able to go and play on some of those venues that he did. There's just no way. They're not gonna come down and watch every high school team in Central California.

*Interviewer:* So the travel circuit has been key in Travis pursuing his aspirations?

GS: Oh it's huge here, you know, I grew up in the Central Valley and I was a real novelty. I played [college basketball] because I didn't have a lot of talent so I only got better, and I had friends at Stanislaus who I played against, guys who were 4 or 5 years older than me. I got lucky, I was a gym rat and played all the time, and got better that way. Nowadays, with video games, and this whole Central Valley is not a predominate basketball-- I mean , baseball, football is a big deal, it's really not--so if you wanna go get better at basketball in the Central Valley, you need to go find games somewhere, and really if you wanna play top-notch stuff you're gonna go to the Bay Area. And really, there's just so many more people, and so many more facilities, and organized, you know, the tournaments they have. Especially for us here, I tell people, they say, "Well what do we need to do to get like Travis?", and I say, 'Well you need to do this, and this, and this', and they say, 'Well that's a lot of work, that's a lot of traveling', and it is a lot of work, you know. If you look at it that way, it's a lot of time out of your day, and you have to plan for that. I think if you want to get better at basketball in the Central Valley, it's really hard, unless you want go out and play at some other levels. You know we knew it'd be hard if he was gonna try to go out and play collegiate ball somewhere, and he knew that too.

Here GS describes a recruiting infrastructure that is clearly-defined and well-established, yet somewhat far removed from their home. Thus, even as his son plays on a team that does not require its participants to pay out of pocket, he still has elected to invest considerable time and resources to supporting his son's participation at the most competitive levels. This suggests parents such as GS recognize various institutionalized elements of their fields that they must learn and navigate in order to take advantage of the structured opportunities. Moreover, GS and his son have experienced tangible returns on their investment in the form of correspondence from college coaches who have seen him play at national showcases such as the It Takes Five Classic and the Super 64.<sup>11</sup>

Because the national basketball showcases are largely team events, basketball families feel they must look beyond just the determination of which events are superior, and identify

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<sup>11</sup> Of the four parents interviewed for this study, three of them had sons that participated in both the It Takes Five Classic and the Super 64 events. The son of the fourth, PH, only participated in the Super 64.

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the club teams that will best further their chances of recruitment. In describing how he measures the success of his son's participation on the basketball scene, JM explains:

...Then you measure it by how successful are you with winning and losing, and how successful are you in actually attaining exposure--if you're talking about the [club team] stuff--actually attaining exposure as well to help him reach other goals, you know, college education and things like that.

*Interviewer:* What are the elements you've identified as necessary to be able to achieve those goals?

*JM:* The things that all have to come together would be: putting him in a position--giving him the resources to continue to improve his strength, fitness, basketball skills, etc.; finding the right [club team] program that is gonna help him get better, that he's gonna have fun playing with the guys, and that also gives him opportunities with respect to exposure. Those are the primary ones that jump out at me.

This point about the salience of the club team experience is important on different levels, as it lends an eye to how families conceptualize a balance between the success of a larger collective unit with individual performance that stands out to recruiters. CM has found that his son's team, based in Atlanta, strikes a healthy balance. The organization is an adidas-branded (contracted) team that is co-sponsored by an NBA player with an adidas endorsement contract, Josh Smith, of the Atlanta Hawks. During games at the adidas Super 64, Smith could be found sitting right next to the team's coaches on the bench. Hence, this highly successful team has had access to substantial resources, ranging from the coverage of travel expenses, to the constant availability of fresh shoes and apparel, to access to private SAT tutors who travel with the team. More significantly, the team has proven to be a remarkably effective pipeline to higher education. According to CM, last year 11 different players received Division I scholarship offers. Consequently, he is unflinching in his belief that the private travel club experience carries more valuable than interscholastic competition: "My child got the chance to go overseas to France for eight days. He never could have done that at his school." Thus, it becomes evident that there is greater confidence in private organizations to afford them college access opportunities. Further, though this range of opportunities is largely a rarity for most athletes of that age, it becomes a prominent incentive for families to buy into the demanding institutional norms of the field. Former adidas basketball marketing director DK elaborates:

I also think the level—one of the reasons why the AAU coach has a lot of control, in my estimation, has a lot to do with recruiting. That parent wants what's best for their kid, they don't want to pay for college, so I believe that they feel they need to expose them to the necessary resources that's gonna allow them to get a scholarship. I think they believe that you gotta play with a club team, because obviously the club team--the talent level of club teams is a higher level, because it's taking the best kids from the area, not just the best kids from the team. It's a higher level of basketball, or a higher level of lacrosse, or a higher level of soccer. I think that parents understand that that is the case. I know a basketball coach would rather evaluate a kid--they'd like to see them play with their high school team, and a lot of teams the high school structure is more structured, and they'd like to see that--but at the end of the day, they wanna see them play against the best, to get the best evaluation. So as a result of that, I think parents have given that control to the club coach.

One potential shortcoming of this description of family goals on the basketball side is the underlying tension between the realities of player participation at these elite events and the realities of family attendance. Consistent with my findings, one might expect a vast majority of parents to attend the ANLC, as lacrosse has a relatively well-off participation base, across the board. In contrast, young people from a far broader range of racial and socioeconomic backgrounds play basketball, including a greater proportion of those from low-income families. Hence, it follows that while there was great parent representation at these events, players from poorer backgrounds were less likely to have their families at these events



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(travel costs and time off work from lower-wage jobs would likely have been prohibitive factors). Consequently, it comes as little surprise that the basketball parents available for interview came from middle-class backgrounds, two-parent households, and had completed postsecondary education. Accordingly, their orientation to recruitment, scholarships, and professional sports goals may have been different, as their material conditions were not of immediate concern. When asked what he would do if it turned out that his son were no good at basketball, GS responds, “Well, I think I'da just went with whatever he wanted to do. To me getting a scholarship isn't absolutely critical...financially, we'd make it work, whatever he wanted to do. He does well and he works hard, but it's not like something that's gotta happen, like if he doesn't get a scholarship, the world's falling down...” Yet, for those who could not “make it work”, it would be easy to understand how they might be more motivated by the material benefits, legitimate or otherwise. Still, the potential material incentives—free trips, apparel and shoes, scholarships, and the chance to make it a career—are attractive to any family. Moreover, any player aspiring to a career in the NBA cannot do so until at least one year after high school completion, thus the college recruitment goal is prominent throughout that sport field, as well as that of lacrosse.

Consistent with the field evidence and the first-hand accounts from parents, the other actors in the field also perceive the goals of the participants as centered on college recruitment. This signals the salience of legitimacy within the field. Ultimately, college coaches, club coaches, marketing directors, and event coordinators all agree that parents and their families view elite sports as an avenue to college. With this information they are able to develop their strategies and service offerings. The college basketball coaches all agree that players and parents patronize these events in order to get their attention. Moreover, while they uniformly assert that these tournaments are emblematic of a larger commercialized youth market, they also acknowledge that they have beneficial in that they allow coaches to see talent they might normally miss. SJ explains:

I definitely think that [elite summer events] sprouted as a service, to be honest, as a service to young kids, whether they were under-exposed, or whatever. I definitely think that this enterprise flourished when there was a need for kids to compete against other kids at a high level, and be seen by a lot of coaches.

I do think ultimately the kids benefit, 'cause they get seen. I do have to say that. It's important for kids to be seen by college coaches, and that's a benefit.

KK—an assistant basketball coach from a conference on the West Coast—believes that the benefits definitely run both ways. He asserts, “The business of athletics in the United States has provided [coaches] more access to kids, but also [kids] more access to schools.

GA—a high school coach who led the 2008 ANLC Northern California team—worryes that too many participants' priorities may be misplaced:

Nobody plays for fun anymore. Everybody's playing with the purpose of getting to the next level.

A lot of parents out here don't know the sport, and the more you know about the college level of the sport, the more you understand it's very difficult. There's only, I think, 40 Division I schools playing the sport. Of those schools...look at the Ivy League, so it's difficult. So you need to understand, and parents need to understand, you know, my mindset has been that you can have all the stick skills, you can be the best athlete in the world, but it's not Ohio State Football. They're not gonna let you in with a 2.0 and a 1000 on your SATs. You're trying to go to Dartmouth, Princeton, Harvard, Hopkins, Virginia, Carolina, Duke. Great academic schools. So you have to be the whole package.

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One high school lacrosse coach at a Bay Area Jesuit school, who also serves on the board of the Pacific Chapter of US Lacrosse, echoes GA's assessment:

*Interviewer:* Do you believe parents see a connection between lacrosse and college?

*TK:* They probably are, but I think they'd be fooling themselves if they really did the math--there's only 52 Division I schools. So if they're thinking they're gonna get a scholarship from one of those 52 schools...proportional to the number of lacrosse players that are available, with the number of scholarships that are available in lacrosse, relative to football, or basketball, when you get [Division I], IAA, Division II, Division III, NAIA...I mean, all those schools can offer 'em somethin' more than what lacrosse can offer.

This observation is not lost on LA, an adidas marketing director who oversees grassroots outreach in lacrosse, soccer, and other sports: "I think parents are more looking for athletics to potentially be a part of the financial solution to college. In an ideal world they'd like that." Consequently, regardless of the fact that they hardly offer reasonable odds, adidas has used the ambitious goals of high school athletes to tailor the formats and promotion strategies for their marketing efforts. As an adidas director for basketball marketing, CR identifies quality summer exposure events as key to advancing the brand: "Because that's why they come. I mean they come to play, but they come to be ranked or perceived, and a kid from Oakland wants to extend his college options off the West Coast, and maybe somebody from Alabama or somebody from Texas has never seen him, play sees him for a week, and that's how kids go from St. Mary's High School in Berkeley to SMU [Southern Methodist University]."

Whether it be lacrosse or basketball, the core motivations for participation in elite events is to pursue a pathway to higher education. Whereas the basketball parents report more ambitious goals, such as scholarships and professional careers, lacrosse parents pursue the best bang for their buck. Moreover, the intense competition for considerable material resources in the basketball field may account for the fact that the parents there were more likely than the lacrosse parents to discuss goals for independent personal skills over extroverted social skills. Thus, in transitioning from the motivations of the participants to those of the apparel company (and other organizational actors), we see that the latter must essentially co-opt those of the former as a means of maximizing effectiveness.

### *Apparel company*

Of the various actors in this field, the apparel company represents the one that is unapologetically commercial. Within the adidas infrastructure, the personnel in charge of designing and coordinating youth sporting events are marketing directors whose ultimate vision is geared toward finding ways connect their products with younger consumers. The staff overseeing the events in this study express this in remarkably direct and consistent terms. According to CR, who also worked in the same capacity for Reebok Basketball, an adidas subsidiary, His main function is, "... to promote footwear and apparel through relations and associations. We sell shoes and clothes, to make it real simple. My job is to form relationships and help promote shoes and clothes." DK, in adidas Basketball until spring 2009, echoes: "I knew that, my understanding was that I'm gonna be the person that's gonna give out sponsorship to teams, and things like that, and my job was gonna be as someone who was gonna develop relationships with the top players...the main focus was like: Get shoes on feet, and become a legitimate basketball brand." LA was even more frank about the organizational mission and the attractiveness of the youth market:

I guess at the most base level high school athletics is big business, and that's when athletes are developing from...you know it's sort of the start of the cradle to the grave and that's when they start developing their

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preference for products. You know, get them early and you've got a customer for life. There's also--I mean--too young, people don't need products to increase their athletic performance, but as you start to hit those high school years and competition gets serious, that's where you obviously have a little more of a need for the product.

Consistent with this formulation, JB elucidates that the success of the events they coordinate is ultimately measured by revenue: “And then you have Henson Group, which their goal essentially is generate revenues, profits, and sales, such that the event is not gonna be anything but a positive impact on those sales.” Thus, there is no question that the chief aim of the entities operating this elite youth infrastructure is financial gain. Of course, with adidas operating as a global for-profit corporation, this comes as little surprise. Nevertheless, what is phenomenal is the grassroots marketing approach that drives this field, as well as the hybrid nature in which the key corporate actors shift back and forth between addressing technical and institutional demands in pursuit of the ultimate goal.

The avenue of choice for these adidas divisions to revenue through sales to youth has been through grassroots marketing. The prevalence of this strategy points to the institutional demands for legitimacy part and parcel to the operations of these organizations. While the personnel interviewed offer a clear theory of action of how such an infrastructure should operate, they speak of it more in terms of what is expected and what seems to make sense, and less in technical terms, or even evidence of prior success. Yet, each is confident that it is an effective strategy. LA expounds the merits of the grassroots events system:

You can--there's a place for the consumer to interact with your product. There are any number of reasons why it's better to be in front of them and give somebody an experience, I mean that's always gonna do more than an ad or publication is...

We had our ESP soccer last week also. We had the 102 top soccer players in the country. We had--there were 2 other layers to that--and Zinedine Zidane came out. I mean, we can deliver a once in a lifetime experience that no other brand could. That's something that's gonna go way further for us. You get the top level kid, he comes back to his club, talks about what an awesome experience he had, and that was at the hands of our brand. Ultimately that's what we want--to be the brand that provides a one of a kind--if you've got Zinedine Zidane out coaching you in soccer, that's a pretty good...that's a pretty good day at the office.

JB, whose East Coast division reports to LA in Portland, is certainly on the same page:

*Interviewer:* Did anyone in Portland say we need you to create an event? Or was that the conclusion you came to on your own?

*JB:* The best way that many athletes purchase products is if they see the elite athletes or elite teams wearing their products, young athletes of America go, ‘That's what I want.’ So that is not a new concept.

At the ANLC kids from all over the country can at least get to a tryout for exposure. It's unique in that all the top kids from each region are currently playing. We already knew that it was going to be an underclassmen event, where it was going to be very appealing to college coaches. So our goal was rather than have all the college coaches having to go to all 20 of the regions, regional coaches could attend this tryout, and they could bring the top 25 participants from each regional tryout to one area in July, and invite all the college coaches to that event, so they could have one-stop shopping.

Naturally, the actors concerned with generating revenue in the lacrosse field must speak with more clarity about eventual impact on sales, and speak in very clear market terms (JB understands that adidas corporate headquarters expects the ANLC to yield an increase in market share that rivals their positioning in wrestling). On the basketball side, sales potential remains a factor, but the continual development of a highly talented, elite membership base takes precedence over all else. DK explains:

Obviously, we wanted the best players at every level to be wearing adidas...adidas basketball shoes. And not only do we want them--we wanted people that were---players that were authentic and a part of the

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game. So a lot of times that's the best players. So in the NBA, college, and Grassroots, the focus was let's give shoes to 100--back in the day, it was like we used to sponsor like 75 high schools by giving them free shit, giving them products to wear....Now the whole idea was these kids are gonna wear our product, we wanna get the kid that gets the kid. That's kinda still talked about. Get the kid that gets the kid. So if you're a star in high school, I want you wearing adidas, the team is wearing adidas, and the kids, they look up to you. You're the local hero that everyone knows about.

*Interviewer:* Where does that model come from? Did anybody ever show you any charts or graphs, or did you just know to do it?

*DK:* No, you kinda just know to do that. This is why we're sponsoring these teams. And we talk about, you know, that's why it's very difficult to measure the return. You know, if you're the star athlete at a school, and I'm giving 15 pairs of shoes for the team. And then on the side, you're the star so I'm sending you shit like 10-15 pairs of shoes over the course of the year, and sweatsuits and stuff. It's difficult to measure what sales--like how many kids say, "I wanna be like this guy, I'm gonna go buy the shoes." ...So when Kobe Bryant graduates from Lower Merion High School, he signed with adidas, because he had that relationship. He never even met with Nike. What I'm saying are the reasons why adidas was really doing this. Sonny Vaccaro, who really created this industry, first at Nike, and then brought it to adidas, and then later on at Reebok.

CR describes similar challenges in identifying measures of effectiveness, particularly during his time at Reebok:

*Interviewer:* What percentage of your energy is devoted to promotion through the athletic structure itself, and what percentage is devoted to promoting to consumers in general?

*CR:* For me, it's about 90-10. My job is not to advertising, my job is not to create marketing platforms, my job is to create brand awareness. In the perfect system this brand awareness will be followed up by great advertising and great marketing. So after July...you see a whole lot of Reebok messages where kids say oh yeah I went to this camp, or my teammate went to this camp, I heard that I can go to Footlocker, I can go to Dick's, I can go to a bunch of places to check out this shoe because Reebok seems to be cool. But we haven't really been able to capitalize on that because we have some product issues.

*Interviewer:* So, much more of how you measure success relates to the short term and the turnout of your events, rather than more long-term sales?

*CR:* Our system currently is not set up to be fully integrated from start to finish. If it was a circle where you start here, you end up finding a player or ends up selling retail, we don't have all the pieces to judge that so I really don't judge myself on that. If we had all the pieces in place then fine, we have this event, have this product, and have this advertising, and have this marketing campaign that's tied to this athlete or tied to something that's cool, that's gonna support what we've started.

In reviewing the quotations from DK and CR it becomes apparent that these corporate actors face difficulties in aligning their efforts to legitimize the basketball brand with tangible revenue outcomes. This speaks to the aforementioned underlying tension between institutional and technical demands, and the overarching salience of legitimacy within the field. adidas Basketball clearly devotes considerable resources to establishing relationships and establishing clear ties between their brand and elite talent, yet they do not have a well-integrated mechanism that allows them to measure effectiveness. Nevertheless, this system is the gold standard for the commercialized basketball field, and external stakeholders, such as coaches, are well aware of how it operates. As a club basketball coach, CF understands the corporate strategy well. He asserts that while he and his colleagues are motivated by the opportunity to increase college access for youth in need, corporate actors such as adidas utilize elite talents to pursue the resources of the pedestrian.

To be honest, [improving college access] is irrelevant to them. They only have one focus. If I'm running the event, I want the best players there, because that means the lesser players are gonna get there too, because they're gonna pay to get there. The elite players don't pay. It's a class system. The better you are,

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the more freebies you get. The lesser kids pay for those capitalists to be successful. There's a camp of 330 kids that the Pumps may run, the top 45 kids did not pay to get into that event. They're gonna be the elite performers at the event as well, because they're more physically gifted. The other 280-plus kids, they're paying to get there, and they're spending up to \$600 a piece to get into that event. The college coaches that are there are coming for the elite kids, and maybe a gold nugget that may show up outta nowhere. And they're paying to be there as well. They may \$250 to get the book that has all the players' names in it. There may be 150 coaches there that pay \$250 to get this book, and they recognize I gotta buy the book, because that's part of the get down. They can write it off as an expense, so it's costing them nothing. And the people doing the event come out with both the monies, the kids that are elite get what they want, the other kids, really, it's what we call being viewed, but not being evaluated. Yeah, you're on the same court, I see you, but I'm not gonna remember who you are because I don't care, I didn't come to see you in the first place. So some kids are on the misnomer that they're playing elite or exposure AAU basketball at a camp or tournament, when they're really just participants.

This is a striking account of what this veteran elite club coach understands to be the lay of the land for corporate involvement in the field. Aside from the sheer lucidity and frankness with which he describes this field, what is most remarkable is the uncanny congruence with the articulation of the basketball marketers. That said, this is not exclusively a basketball phenomenon, and club basketball coaches are not the only ones who must balance their own litany of intentions with those of large scale profit-driven entities.

### *Club coaches*

High school-level coaches in basketball and lacrosse act as indispensable intermediaries in their respective fields. Consequently, they must be acutely aware of the realities of several different worlds: from those of the youth they serve, to those of the corporate entities whose events they patronize, to those of the college coaches with whom they advocate on behalf of their players. Even so, these field-level actors generally speak about the mission of their work in terms of generating opportunities for young people. For RY, whose Bay Area organization had been in operation for roughly 20 years prior to its merger with another team, college access is the main goal, but suspects all his peers may not agree:

But the main goal is to get these kids in school, and hopefully that they can get their degree... The kids are competitive, the coaches are competitive. There's a lot of money at stake, because guys are getting shoe money and shoe deals for their programs, so obviously everybody wants to have the better kids, to say that we have the better team, or whatever. I personally think the ultimate goal should be to get the kids to college, whether it be Division III, NAIA, Division II, Division I. Low, mid-to-high level. My goal, as an individual, is to help 'em all get in school. That is what I'm doing this for.

He also points out that his organization has a rich history of serving children as young as five and six years old all the way up through high school, and that the families they work with come from a broad range of backgrounds. Further, while their comprehensive approach to youth support is laudable, the college recruitment and scholarship piece is not lost on parents, including those from wealthier backgrounds:

*Interviewer:* Do you find that more well-off families are now seeking out the Rebels?

*RY:* They are, because here's what really happens. In their neighborhoods, there's not a lot of basketball really going on, and if there is, it's not really competitive. So if I bring Mike down to play with these guys, he's obviously a good player, he's gonna get better, because the competition is better. So yeah, you do get that, and they don't mind traveling to get here for that. And to be honest with you, some of those kids are better than the kids in the inner city.

RY also believes that they are able to work with such a broad swath of family backgrounds by virtue of being based in the Bay Area. CF concurs:

Some kids that we profile—because we find them, we go to games and we run camps, and we'll see kids and we'll offer them an opportunity to come play for us. And it doesn't matter what their background is. We've had kids come from American Samoa, kids that were Asian, kids that were Latin, we had a kid that

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was Iranian. You're now seeing a huge huge growth of kids that are from Pacific Islander background, taking on interest in the sport, trying to go to college. Kids that are from the Middle East and from India, that is a huge population that's growing, and we've had kids from those backgrounds. One of our kids this year was the very first Sri Lankan in the history of the sub-continent who earned a Division I scholarship, he's going to Colgate. And I happened to meet him at a health club, because he was good friends with a kid that I trained. So, we're getting just the whole Pandora's Box of young people who the common thread is that they love basketball, and we're either creating the dream of going to college, or we're enhancing the dream of making them feel as if they can actually get a free education.

*Interviewer:* Is [the diversity] a reflection of a national trend or is it mostly a function of being in the Bay Area?

*CF:* Mostly the multiculturalism is a function of being in the Bay Area, because if we have a kid from San Francisco, that kid can just as easily be Filipino, Chinese, Japanese, White, African American, or Latin. Because that's a varied marketplace. If we get a kid that's from Pleasanton, San Ramon, we're probably more likely to get a kid who's got European background. In some cases they may be African American, where their parents have become fairly affluent, but you don't see as much of a cross-section of kids in that market. If you get a kid from Richmond, there's probably a pretty high percentage that that kid is either African American, Latin, third-world Asian, or he might be a kid of a parent who's a Flatlander. So our market dictates when you go around the country, you generally see some fairly homogenized teams. You may see a team from Colorado that's 85% white, with one black kid, and you might see teams from the south, and five or six teams from Georgia might all be in the same tournament, and they're all 100% African American. And that's not to say there aren't kids from other places playing, but people tend to grab kids from their generalized area. Our program is different because we attract kids from a little bit of everywhere.

These points around the diversity of families looking to break into the elite infrastructure speak to the pervasiveness of the significant investment in youth sports across racial and class lines. As discussed in earlier chapters, much of the literature on youth sports suggests that such intense involvement from an early age has been a symptom of the misguided priorities of many poor and black families, who supposedly believe athletics offer greater merits than academics in advancing their social mobility. These club basketball coaches underscore the fact that they encounter young men from all races and ethnicities, across income levels. Thus, the stereotypical characterizations of zealous families in pursuit of higher education require re-examination. Moreover, CF's reference to the "marketplace" sheds light on the underlying force driving the operation of this field. He elaborates:

*Interviewer:* Do you believe that this landscape is still designed for "poor black kids", or is that an outsider belief?

*CF:* That's an outsider thing, because what you find is that when you tell people—there are two different areas of "AAU basketball", and I use that term loosely, cuz that's a generic term. It's a moniker that's been put on sports that aren't connected with school. There's an official organization called the Amateur Athletic Union, which sanctions events. Well most of the events we go to don't have anything to do with AAU as a national sanctioning body, it's just simply an offseason event. Now, as you go with the younger ages, if you deal with kids that are from 9 and up, then most of those bigger events are sanctioned by a governing body. But there are events for those young people that are not sanctioned. So I use the term loosely, but let's just say in our realm, there's participatory AAU at the high school level....They're learning how to become better players, and it's just a chance for them to have some more fun. Then, there's exposure AAU. Exposure AAU players fit the profile, you have the size, you have enough athleticism to where you were decently fluid on the court, you profile to be the type of specimen that a college coach would look at. Now, are you good enough to be one of those kids? That's what they wanna come see...The world that we deal with are the kids that profile that we can help get a free education, that's where our resources are put in place. That's why parents seek us out. The participatory part, it's more fun just natural competitiveness to wanna get together and go compete against different players. Needless to say, they dream about going to play against better players so that they can get better...Basketball is really good, because it takes the economics out.

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Nowadays, everybody finds a way to get to tournaments, doesn't matter if it's inner-city or whatever, they fundraise, they do whatever, or they're rich.

Thus, the fact that club basketball presents a litany of opportunities and benefits that appeal to a wide range of youth and their families presents a paradox for coaches. There is a deep pool of athletes from which to form a competitive team that can excel in highly competitive regional and national events, yet that means they must sift through a greater number of players to find top talent. On the lacrosse side, a study of these events reveals a different dynamic.

Given that lacrosse is not a sport that consists of balanced participation even on the geographic level—let alone the racial and socio-economic levels—lacrosse coaches at the high school level do not face the same opportunities or demands to attract talent and compete. With the lack of material incentives or prospects for notoriety, these coaches on aggregate do not face the same intense pressures to compile teams that can excel at national showcase platforms. Further, the geographical disparities fundamental to the sport dictate that “elite” teams may form in certain areas of the country where in reality there may not be a great deal of high-level talent qualified to play at the intercollegiate level. As described in the previous chapter, the adidas National Lacrosse Classic is a testament to this dynamic. At the 2009 event, the teams from non-traditional lacrosse regions struggled noticeably against those established powerhouses. Thus, coaches in less prominent areas must balance the demands of winning and aiding young athletes in pursuit of college access with the reality of scarcity of high-level talent. GA has been one of the most successful high school coaches in the Bay Area, and yet he acknowledges that part of being a club coach who aims to help young players in the area gain access to college opportunities entails developing a team that can capture the attention of East Coasters:

Our goal in forming our [elite travel club] team was to be very good, and to present the best team that we could to the East Coast and to the college coaches...I know college coaches are far more interested today than they were five years ago in recruiting California kids. They see it as an untapped state, they know it's a high-growth sport here, they recognize that we can play it outside 12 months a year, that there are things the state can offer that other states can't offer as far as the facilities...

Thus, lacrosse coaches hoping to gain legitimacy as gatekeepers to college teams have a more specific regional market that they must infiltrate. The next chapter will explore institutional demands of club coaches in more detail. Beyond the work they do in developing their own teams, club coaches in both sports must work on behalf of other actors in the field.

As apparel companies and college coaches spend the vast majority of their time at their home bases working on the day-to-day operations of their jobs, that leaves little time for them to be able to spend time observing young talent firsthand. Thus, they rely on a bevy of proxies to not only keep them apprised of the top prospects, but also help them establish relationships. Club coaches ultimately act as the most reliable proxies, and consequently it becomes critical that they be able to identify the elite talent in their areas, even if those players will not play for their teams. As the adidas marketing directors explain in the previous chapter, they rely upon club coaches to pull as many of the best players from each region possible into their elite national network. DK goes on:

With the grassroots coaches, it's very vital, someone's always chatting. What's the scuttlebutt? News travels fast, word of mouth. There's always, "hey have you seen this kid? I heard about this kid." If there was someone in Marin County that wasn't playing for one of these guys, one of these guys would probably know about it, and they would try to get the guy. Now what would normally happen is that guy from the Bay Area Hoosiers would call me and say, "I tried to get this guy, but I haven't been able to get this guy. This guy's gonna play for his dad." So then we're gonna have to make a decision to bring the dad on as a program or

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not, cuz this guy could be that good. In that type of situation, I would have to say I'm gonna sponsor this program here, because we really need this kid. That is less and less likely. That used to happen a lot. Nowadays, it's like I'm not gonna sponsor a team just for one player.

Hence, it becomes clear that this market environment establishes information as currency, and incentives are in place for coaches to make continuous efforts to keep current with the best players in their regions. Still, RY asserts there are non-material incentives that drive them to be aware of surrounding talent, such as regional pride:

I've always had this idea of taking the best OAL (Oakland Athletic League) guys, cuz the OAL was pretty loaded, and make that a travel team. Well obviously, some play for the Soldiers, some play for the Rebels, some play for this organization...So guys don't want you to have their kids, but I think if you're goin to a national tournament, you should take the best guys from you area. One thing that I would hope would happen is one day the Soldiers, Rebels, and Hoosiers would all, as one, maybe pick one tournament that year, and take the 3 best Soldier kids, 3 best Rebel Kids, and 3 best Hoosier kids that fit what we're trying to do, and let them go to a national tournament and represent the Bay Area.

Therefore, as much as individual coaches may be concerned with the competitiveness and prosperity of their own teams, this passage suggests they also hold a collective interest in the talent level and prominence of players their area, within a national context. In the end, whatever the motivation, these actors are concerned with developing their capacity to track elite talent before their peers can, even starting as early as middle school. Incidentally, this charge mirrors that of college coaches, whose livelihoods depend on their exclusive access to successful athletes in a competitive market environment.

### *College coaches*

In this highly competitive, market-based elite sports field, college coaches possess the most valued, immediately-available commodity in the process: college admission and potential financial aid. Further, their motivations may be the most straightforward of the actors discussed in this project. In order to win, they must bring in the best players possible while complying with NCAA regulations. Hence, much of their motivations and tasks are predetermined, with little variability. Still, despite the fact that these coaches constitute the primary “purchasers” of student athlete “labor”, if you will, they still must compete with one another to attract the most capable talents, which are considered to be available in limited numbers. The Cincinnati and Las Vegas basketball events present stark examples of the paradoxical nature of the mission of college coaches in the field. Before they even enter the gym, these coaches know that roughly 3,000 young men have gathered in the hopes of grabbing their attention and gaining a shot at a free college education. Still, once the doors open, they will fork over as much as \$300 each to enter and receive key information on the players. Moreover, once they spot a player that appears to be a strong fit for their program, they can rest assured that competing coaches throughout the nation will have spotted him as well, and thus their mindset will shift from that of a leveraged buyer to an aggressive seller. Thus, coaches take and compare notes, ask around about unknown players, and formulate strategies to initiate contact with their favorite prospects.

Coach JT, whose team is in direct competition with some of the most talented and decorated programs in the country, notes that this market environment offers multi-lateral benefits offer in that they generate profits for the organizers, exposure opportunities for the students, and up-close looks at otherwise obscured players for he and his contemporaries. Additionally, all coaches agree that recruiting represents a strenuous process through which



#### **Chapter 4—How do the core actors describe their central motivations pertaining to participation within the field?**

they must identify the most influential actors in a desired player's community and convince him of the comprehensive merits of their institutions. For coaches such as JT and SJ, whose institutions rank among the nation's best academically, educational prestige can be just as much of a selling point for aspiring student athletes as athletic success:

Coaches have to determine approach; students are the same as they've always been; it's about how you recruit We 'sell' [his former school and his current school, both of which are highly competitive academic institutions] to families by highlighting the quality educational experience · Once air comes out of the ball and you can't play anymore, you're gonna have a degree and options because of friends you make.

Here JT describes how coaches in his position leverage the realities of the unlikelihood of pursuing a professional career by expounding the benefits of social capital following graduation. SJ is even more passionate about promoting his school's institutional mission in recruiting: "But at the end of the day, different institutions bring different things to the table, so I don't necessarily want to make us all the same, because that would be dangerous. I like the fact that we're the best school in the country. That's something we bring to the table that School A, B, or C, no matter how much money they have in their athletic budget, can't talk about." SJ's exclamation suggests that college coaches in this field seek to press whatever angle they can in order to distinguish themselves from the masses. Moreover, it points to the fact that these highly competitive athletic fields can also promote greater academic excellence on the student side.

Ultimately, the evidence suggests that the significant actors in this field describe themselves as largely motivated by the expectation of some market-driven exchange of services, goods, or resources. At each level, those participating face significant pressures to compete on a national level for college admission, financial aid, talent, and revenue. It is clear that each actor—regardless of function, station, or background—has a specific understanding of how to navigate the field in order to increase their chances of attaining their goals. What is worth noting is that fame and fortune is less part of the narrative for any actor than is the college access and athletic scholarship infrastructure. This is especially true of parents, who are over-educated about their options, if anything. Still—contrary to conventional wisdom—these pressures are not only technical in nature, but also rooted in institutionalized demands for legitimacy. The following chapter investigates how both the technical and institutional demands materialize in each field.

## **Chapter 5—What technical-efficiency and institutional-normative demands do these core actors face as they vie for influence in the field, and where do they come from?**

Up to this point the description of these youth organizational fields has largely highlighted the market dynamics driven by the technical efficiency aspects of the field. Accordingly, this has explained degree to which their various core actors are motivated by bottom-line cost-benefit analyses. Nevertheless, institutional theory asserts that beyond the mere technical-efficiency requirements for profitable operation (e.g. inputs, outputs, cost-effectiveness, etc.), actors in a market-driven field behave in patterns consistent with concerns for legitimacy and propriety. Consequently, Chapter 4 demonstrates that they—particularly the organizations—often simultaneously act as profit-seekers at the same time as they pursue institutional survival, which can create an at-times paradoxical dynamic. That is, thriving and surviving may conflict with one another at times, as that which supports legitimacy may sometimes fly in the face of efficiency and yet still work to ensure survival. Of course, this is not just true for organizations. Student athletes and their families clearly make value-driven decisions in this field, and yet they absolutely behave in ways that appear to cost them more in resources than they stand to gain. The previous chapter illustrates that various forces beyond an actor's own volition influence the patterns of behavior. This chapter explores the nature as well as the sources of the major technical and institutional demands that shape these youth athletic fields. In turn, it uncovers the various elements that lead individuals and organizations alike to make decisions that are often contradictory in nature.

### **TECHNICAL EFFICIENCY DEMANDS**

#### *Participants*

Even as individual players and families, there are still various technical requirements that participants must meet in order to perform at a high level. Still, these requirements are likely the most straightforward for any party in the field. The parents interviewed in this study definitely believe in the meritocratic nature of elite youth sports, perhaps pointing to the initial appeal of their investment in such a seemingly uncertain sector. In speaking about their roles as parents, they highlight the importance of providing their children with opportunities that place them in the best position to develop their skill sets. GS discusses the impetus behind his son's intense involvement on his elite travel basketball team:

And I knew if he was ever thinking about playing at a higher level, you know, college ball, I knew what that felt like, I knew how hard that was myself, because four years I played varsity there. I could tell him that you do the right thing. If you're thinkin about playing at those levels you need to work on your skill sets all the time, and you need to play against the best people that you can play against, and hopefully have some fun with it. Basically, it was never really anything that he ever fought. I mean he wanted to do it and we made it available to him, and it always worked out well. It always started with him, and I was able to offer him a chance to go out there and make the weekend trips for games and practices and all that. It was always something that was a good time and fun time to be with him...

What is apparent from this passage is that basketball skill development and heavy competition are inputs that participants and their families can control as a means of expanding their athletic capabilities, which should lead to outputs of higher performance outputs and greater visibility to coaches. The resources they allocate towards furthering their children's training can be considered a technical demand for success, and yet—as this chapter will explore further—the expectation that the best training will come from the elite grassroots field represents an institutional demand. Still, with so many youth vying for so few spots, families in pursuit of higher educational access through athletics have a firm grasp of what individual elements go into producing players of the highest possible quality.

## **Chapter 5—What technical-efficiency and institutional-normative demands do these core actors face as they vie for influence in the field, and where do they come from?**

MM, whose son plays for multiple lacrosse teams over the course of a year, operates under the assumption that there is a fungible mix of technical inputs that result in greater ability for student athletes who are not among those rare cases born with uncanny physical abilities: “...unless you're a gifted athlete, you're not gonna progress fast, and even the gifted athlete needs time in that sport to get better, so it almost begs that year-round experience to get regular knowledge and experience, even if you're not playing [competitively] year-round.” Also included in these necessary attributes are a combination of strength, fitness and conditioning, and motor skills necessary to excel at sport-specific tasks (i.e. shooting and passing). At the end of the day, all parties involved in the process of evaluating players—be it at the club coach, college coach, or even apparel company level—look for these elements above all else (even the coaches at some of the nation’s most academically reputable universities place talent atop the list of priorities). Still, these potential inputs are distributed unevenly, based on a multitude of factors.

While the world of sports has often proven to be the great equalizer in American society, this youth athletics market environment certainly underscores the inherent inequalities among the young participants. First, there are the very obvious biological disparities: some kids are born with physical attributes or abilities that place them at a clear advantage should they choose to participate in sports; thus they may appeal to coaches on the basis of sheer aesthetics. On the other hand, developing proficiency requires the availability of ample resources for additional training necessary to develop a stronger skill set. Naturally, that availability is often stratified in accordance with socio-economic status, hence creating disproportionate access to technical improvement tools. While such disparity is commonplace throughout various realms of social life, what is striking about this market-driven youth context is that there are direct implications for access to benefits such as higher education admission and aid. Without limitations on dollars or hours spent on individual development, participants with the means can further distance themselves from the larger population. That said, the market dynamics of the field afford the movement of resources such that it enhances the capacity of thriving organizations to subsidize access to many of these inputs for less well-off participants, provided they possess great potential.

### *Apparel company*

As the primary corporate entity, the apparel company is the actor within the field that most clearly operates under a pure market context. Above all else, the objective of adidas is to maximize its profit and strengthen its position within the marketplace. Accordingly, there are certain technical efficiency demands that the firm must satisfy in order to sustain optimum operation and outcomes. For instance, it must generate revenue through whatever viable avenues (primarily retail sales), and ultimately increase its market share within the apparel industry so as to mitigate any threats from the competition. Consequently, the overarching technical demands boil down to the revenue generation, protection from external uncertainty, and the preservation of internal stability.

In this highly competitive sports apparel field, adidas is under pressure to devise a strategy to generate revenue that transcends traditional retail sales promotion strategies. Hence, grassroots marketing events represent a creative and relatively cost-effective mechanism through which the firm can simultaneously generate income as well as increase

## **Chapter 5—What technical-efficiency and institutional-normative demands do these core actors face as they vie for influence in the field, and where do they come from?**

exposure within the marketplace. JB explains the infrastructure behind the ANLC event and how it ties in to sales revenue:

You have one entity, Level 2 Sports, which is an LLC business of their own. They're trying to, of course, make sure that they raise revenues. You have a partnership with us, as far as adidas is concerned, where we need to protect the brand, and make sure that we're doing everything on a professional level with corporate...And then you have Henson Group, which their goal essentially is generate revenues, profits, and sales, such that the event is not gonna be anything but a positive impact on those sales.

As discussed in earlier chapters, the adidas marketing personnel in the lacrosse field appear to have a much more delineated theory of action linking grassroots marketing to sales revenue, since the latter is at the foundation of a successful venture in that sport. On the other hand, CR asserts that with inadequate synergy between marketing and sales strategy on the basketball side, it becomes easier for internal actors to question the degree to which a grassroots approach in their sport is beneficial to the company:

*Interviewer* Why do you think [it is that many people within the firm do not understand what you do]?

*CR:* Because when business is bad, we're just looked at as a scapegoat. It's not helping, no one's buying you're shoes, we're giving you guys all this money, but no one wants to have a real conversation about this whole circle I talked about. I can only respectfully say so much...some people don't really want to find the truth, they just wanna keep blaming something else for what's not going right.

Thus, it becomes apparent that despite the fact that they face clear technical efficiency pressures, these marketing directors may not possess the means to satisfy them. What is more, as the pressures mount for marketing personnel to be simultaneously more productive and more efficient, there is subsequent demand to acquire more inputs. Thus, they encounter an age-old paradox in that in order to net more dollars they must vie for more dollars to spend. Still, the capacity to acquire these resources may depend largely on the degree to which they can act in accordance with the organizational hierarchy.

As might be expected in any corporate environment where individuals are able to act independently on creative projects, those charged with implementing grassroots marketing strategies for adidas are acutely aware of the importance of compliance with the overarching organizational mission. Whether it be an internal employee based in Portland or a marketing director at the independent organization the company contracts with for its lacrosse endeavors, the expectation is that all ideas will accurately reflect the pre-determined brand image, and that they will be approved by higher-ups. JB details the story of how his small organization came to lead the marketing initiatives for lacrosse, wrestling and field hockey:

My thought was when I came in, let's go through adidas America, where we can get some resources and some support, to be able to develop these events and create this event division. And adidas America basically said lacrosse, field hockey, and wrestling were under our umbrella, and anything we wanted to do--our development on that--would fall under our responsibility, and they encouraged it in that we would need to run approval of all such events and development of any types of programs through them to make sure we're staying in line with the corporate identity and such. That was really the brainchild of the Henson Group.

So the goals outlined for us were build the brand, follow corporate identity, you know as far as the CI policy that adidas has in place, and fill the void in the market that was there that adidas didn't supply for lacrosse, field hockey, and wrestling. At least that's what my CEO/President said we need to do. So I'm assuming that was the philosophy that was handed down, or contracted, and officially agreed upon between them and adidas Corporate.

JB's description of the inception of their business relationship and grassroots strategy underscores the significance of vertical compliance as a technical efficiency demand. Individual entities secure their resources and their relative autonomy by taking the necessary steps to

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demonstrate their alignment with the organizational hierarchy. It certainly appears that creative leverage has some bearing on the level of technical autonomy granted to an organizer. In JB's case, his organization was brought in with some expectation that they would develop a viable strategy for these three sports that transcended the capacity of those working at the headquarters in Portland (or Germany, for that matter). The combination of their creative input, network, and knowledge of those sports fields afforded them greater flexibility. On the other hand, the basketball marketing team already had a clear vision of how their events-based strategy should be implemented, hence they sought out organizers with the appropriate network and knowledge of the sport who could implement it. RM explains his charge for the event in Las Vegas:

Well, you know, I'm a--how do I put it--they tell me what their vision is, and I fulfill their vision. It's not like I've had full independence to just do what I want. You know, I am going to do whatever they want me to do, and run the tournament the way they want me to.

Thus, the event organizer's attention to organizational expectations has significant bearing on how he views the tasks he must accomplish. Still, while demands for vertical compliance for actors within a firm may be limiting at times, they are still essential in that they also provide the basis for each actor to receive the necessary resources for their endeavors.

Whereas the promotion of a top-down organizational mission may confine the creative license of personnel involved in developing and/or implementing marketing strategies, the marketing directors recognize that buy-in from higher-ups is the key to acquiring essential inputs. When asked what is the most important element is in order for his division to reach its goals, CR responds that support from upper management and a healthy allocation of resources come first. adidas presents a particularly compelling example of the need for clear organizational hierarchy as its global headquarters is based in Germany. adidas dominated the performance athletic footwear industry for the better part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, both abroad and within the United States. However, as strong competitors such as Nike and Reebok eventually emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, they made little effort to expand their corporate operations globally, and particularly not in the United States, which resulted in the company slipping in position in the US market (Slack & Parent, 2006; Smit, 2008). Hence, the firm suffered from its sluggishness to establish a clear and cohesive organizational structure that could support a growing market in the United States and other nations. DK describes some of the adverse residual effects from this organizational misstep:

The current--and then you also have with adidas--because adidas is a German company, there are subsidiaries and different areas. The interesting you have with adidas is there's a Global and International group, and then there's a U.S. group. For every sport like soccer and everything else, the global headquarter are in Germany, except for baseball, and American football, and basketball. So it's a little bit--so often times there was, here in the US, there's two groups: the global group, and the US group, whereas like in soccer, for instance, there was just the US group here, or in running there was just the US group here. They were also doing the same thing. As a result of that, there's often been people doing similar jobs, a lot of finger pointing back and forth because both groups are here doing the same thing. In the past, it was very segregated, and a lot of finger-pointing, and 'I can do it better', and who's in control and shit like that. But over the course of my time they really worked to integrate the groups, and then now there's again more and more separation. Like even [basketball marketing director] now, he's been hired by the global group. And now there's some--there's a little bit of behind the scenes--I don't really know what's going on, but the global group is trying to get Grassroots in the US under them.

The lack of clear role definition or organizational hierarchy is disadvantageous to the technical function of certain divisions within the firm. Moreover, the prominence of institutional

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demands increases as a means of mitigating uncertainty and increasing the likelihood of surviving and thriving. This subject will come appear in greater detail later in the chapter.

### *College coaches*

College coaches represent the single contingent within this sports field for whom winning is an unmistakable technical requirement. Whether it be in the big business of basketball or the more moderate lacrosse field, there are always far more candidates than positions and thus their livelihoods largely depend on their ability to win games, and ultimately championships. Even at schools whose academic reputations far precede their athletic notoriety, the coaches operate with the understanding that their job security is tied to their ability to field a competitive team. In SJ's case, as basketball coach at his prestigious campus the natural demand for success is compounded by the prior successes the program has had:

*Interviewer:* What are your primary objectives for your position?

*SJ:* As a head coach here of our men's program, there's obviously a high standard in terms of, quite frankly, winning. We've won a lot of championships, we have a national exposure, and yet I think the charge for my boss...it is about winning, but it's not all about winning. I guess I approach it, let's be very very competitive on the basketball floor. You know, compete for a championship if the Lord wills it.

*Interviewer:* So then, at the end of the day it can't hurt to win some games?

*SJ:* Well I don't think that...I don't think that...you're not gonna be coaching long anywhere if you're not having some level of success on the court, and our ability to win games will allow me to stay in my position, and will hopefully allow the assistants to stay in their position.

Hence, a team's success does not just determine the fate of the head college coach, but also that of everyone on his staff. Consequently, it becomes imperative that they all make diligent efforts to put together a team with the greatest possible probability of winning. Nevertheless, as important as it is to develop a strong unit with great potential for victory, this process must occur within the bounds of compliance with the expectations of the institutional administration.

All the college coaches interviewed for this study highlight the ultimate importance of meeting the standards of the greater administration. Accordingly, the underlying theme is that coaches do not want to risk compromising the trust of university higher-ups, who might pull their resources if they continuously bring in student athletes unqualified to thrive in the academic environment. Coach GT reveals that at his university the personnel in his program emphasize the importance of building trust with the administration, as well as a team culture that promotes consistency with academic culture of the institution. KK, whose team had a 3.1 team GPA last year, explains that the coaches on his staff take a great deal of pride in having athletes do well in class: "We don't want to abuse our position; we want to show administration that we want our guys to enhance the student body." Part and parcel of this effort to establish trust is the compliance with university admissions protocol. Hence, many coaches are hesitant to outwardly describe themselves as admissions officers.

By and large, the college coaches were not comfortable with the idea of being considered as influential admissions officers. This is partly because they do not want to send misleading messages about the academic standards and quality of their respective institutions, but also they do not want to undermine the intellectual capabilities of their players. Thus, they

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emphatically assert that their recruiting must be completely in line with the intake protocol for their universities. SJ speaks in greater detail:

*Interviewer:* How would you describe your position as an admissions officer on campus, and what are the core principles that drive your approach to recruiting student athletes?

*SJ:* I'd say the first is there's a very clear, clear, clear line drawn in the Ivy League that the Admissions Office is the Admissions Office, and the coaches and the athletic department are a separate entity. I think that's very important, because in a sense, it's about checks and balances. If we feel great about a certain kid, that's gonna impact how we view his or her ability to be able to do the work here academically, it's gonna influence that. Our admissions office isn't influenced by that at all. They stay detached from the athletic side in evaluating all that stuff, and they look at the academic credentials. And I think that that keeps us closer to the core of what's important at Princeton, which is, great ball player--yes, but let's have great students. So, I say all that to say I don't play a role in the admissions process at all. I don't serve necessarily as an admissions officer, not in any kind of role, officially or unofficially.

In the end, what is clear is that college coaches must adhere to a particular organizational hierarchy in similar ways to corporate marketing departments. They represent the other group within the field that must simultaneously vie for resources from a larger organizational pool and work to protect the sustainability of its division. This dynamic points to the multiple facets of technical requirements college coaches engage over the course of their work. Whereas the technical demands are relatively straightforward, the institutional demands create a more complicated landscape.

### *Club coaches*

Given the nature of the field, the technical demands club coaches face are almost counterintuitive in that they do not wholly center on competition on the court. Whereas college coaches face immense competition to keep their jobs because there are only a limited number of positions available, there are relatively few barriers to entry in the club circuit. Consequently, more than for any other actor, mere organizational survival constitutes the fundamental technical requirement for a club coach. There is potential for individuals, companies, and colleges to work with almost an infinite range of clubs, with very few protections for even the most established organizations. Accordingly, without any stable financial guarantees, fundraising is a pivotal requirement for sustained and successful operation.

As there typically is no overarching organizational hierarchy to which they are accountable, participation in the club infrastructure grants coaches more independence in determining how to operate their teams and naturally lessens the immediate pressure to win games. On the other hand, this lack of organizational pressure from above also means there is no institutionalized resource support. Thus, coaches must identify their own channels from which they can acquire the necessary operating inputs, be that through independent fundraising, sponsorship, paying out of their own pockets, or passing the bulk of the costs through to the youth participants. In fact, the method by which they generate revenue may actually shape the team identity. Coach RY explains that team fundraising becomes almost a programmatic element of the organizational mission:

*Interviewer:* Have you all been sponsored across levels?

*RY:* No, we fundraise. You know, it's funny because other organizations use that against us, because we always have to sell raffle tickets, we got to do chicken dinner sales, we have to do car washes, we have to do cookie dough sales. You know it's a standing lil' joke that we all laugh about, because they say in the

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summertime we out there sellin' candy bars, and the chocolate is melting. I get along with all those guys though. But we do fundraise, and they may have the money immediately to tell the kids we're going to this tournament, but we tell the kids we gotta work to get to this tournament. So it actually teaches them how to work, it teaches them how to go out if they have to sell raffle tickets, it teaches them how to communicate with people they don't know, it teaches them how to be turned down by saying, "Would you like to buy a raffle ticket? No?" Well you may ask ten people, and only get one or two dollars out of those ten asks. You have to sit there and they ask what is the raffle for, where are you guys going, so you have to communicate and teach them people skills. It teaches them not to be afraid to speak up to people and kinda communicate.

In this case, RY describes how his organization leverages the real costs of technical inputs as a means to provide life skills education to its young members. In fact, the coaches at this level largely describe the work they do in educational and philanthropic terms. Even as the coach of a team with a stable history of sponsorship and public exposure, CF still underscores the fact that their operation is driven by volunteerism:

So that's the hub of what we do—a little background on what we are—I think that the one thing that we have found is that—first of all, we're a volunteer organization. No one in our organization gets compensated for the work that we do, the time that we spend, the events that we run—they're not designed so that we make them moneymakers for us. They're revenue generators for us to be able to provide these services to the young people at no cost.

Hence, the high school coaches are the actors within this field who are least likely to describe the requirements of their job in business terms, despite high levels of organizational uncertainty. Nevertheless, that does not mean these coaches do not possess a firm understanding of the business elements endemic to the field.

In describing his time spent coaching a regional team for the major national lacrosse event, GA details how it became clear that the technical requirements of the position were driven by financial considerations:

I could be real cynical with you. I coached the adidas team last year. So I think what you've got right now, in the corporate lacrosse world so to speak is that you've got two companies, STX and Brine, that for years were the only action in lacrosse, and there wasn't that much money to make in it, so other people didn't jump in. Now, it's the fastest-growing sport in the United States. So Under Armour gets involved, adidas gets involved, Nike gets involved, and they're all trying to compete for the same buck and the same kid, and so you know, the adidas event, you were able to go to a tryout and watch the kids try out. What you weren't privy to see were the emails that they send about, "Get your numbers up, we need 140 kids spending \$190 dollars each to try out for your team." I had a major problem with it, in that some of the kids that were asking me, you know, "Coach, I'm gonna try out for this team, do you think it's a good opportunity?" I thought, "There's no way in hell you're gonna make the team, so why am I gonna tell you to spend \$190 for me to tell you you're not gonna make the team?" I had a real tough time with that...

In this case, GA's employment as a regional coach and subsequently his ability to obtain equipment and resources for his own club team were tied to his compliance with the technical requirements sets by the sponsoring apparel company. Moreover, those requirements were driven by the pursuit of revenue, more so than the identification of top talent. Essentially, the revenue earned from the regional tryout process took precedent over developing an exclusive experience comprised primarily of premier talent. Further, this account suggests the profit-driven demands brought about pressure to mislead young athletes, in that GA felt meeting his quota would mean that he would have to recruit players to try out that he knew would not be strong candidates to make the team. As a result, he elected not to coach at the adidas event the following year, and yet when he took on a role with a competing apparel company he encountered a similar dynamic.

Ultimately, the technical demands facing each group of actors are not exclusive to that group. For example, college coaches and even apparel companies must devote time and



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resources to fundraising, but it is most pressing for the club teams. That said, the common feature of these requirements is that they are clear to each actor, and they have been explicitly defined, typically at a superior level. Still, much of what determines how these actors behave and/or make decisions is not based on explicit direction. Hence, it becomes apparent that institutionalized norms, practices, and beliefs largely shape the landscape of the field.

### **INSTITUTIONAL DEMANDS**

#### *Participants*

With no clear organizational hierarchy to regulate their individual activities and choices, much of participants' task conception—the information that informs their work and decision-making—is rooted in institutional demands. That is, there are truly few means to compel an aspiring athlete to pursue a particular course of action, and yet many of them exhibit similar tendencies, both within and across sports. Subsequently, this phenomenon is based on various perceptions of what constitutes a legitimate athlete and a legitimate athletic experience in a given sports field. As college constitutes the logical next level of competition for the high school participants at these elite events, youth and their families seek to understand how to improve their chances of being recruited by a university program. Of course, the assumption here is that the most direct pathway to playing at an elite level involves going through this process, despite the fact that college coaches are absolutely able to bring players onto their teams once they are already enrolled at the university. Nevertheless, the modern youth sports industry is populated by families attempting to navigate this highly competitive recruiting process. Incidentally, it is almost counterintuitive that one of the most salient aspects of the process is the academic performance of the student athlete.

Perhaps one of the most fascinating elements of any conversation with a parent of a talented young athlete regarding the college recruiting process is to hear her or him speak at great length about the primacy of academic achievement. This flies in the face of literature asserting that a supposed obsession with youth sports must not be conducive to a value system that favors high academic performance. In describing their approach to mobility through this athletic infrastructure, these parents tell of scholastic acumen being as important an attribute as physical ability:

*CM:* If it doesn't look like players are going to succeed academically, college coaches will back off and look for someone else.

*TA:* You can be a guy who scores 50 goals a season but if you've got a 70 average, you're not gonna play D-1. The more competitive lacrosse has gotten, the more important grades have become, because you can't get a 75 average and play at a top school. You have to be the whole package.

*SS:* [In response to being asked about the most important attributes an aspiring college lacrosse athlete must have] A solid high school academic experience as well as a strong high school team program, including a strong club program.

*PH:* I think being an athlete—a lot of people feel that—I know a lot of teachers don't think that athletes really learn a lot, except playing their sports...I know, for example, and I'm not gonna say basketball, there's a volleyball person—this young lady, it is not a norm for her to make her grades. She just does whatever she wants, and her dream, from her parents, is for this young lady to get into a college and play volleyball. But you cannot get into a college with bad grades, I don't care how good you are. Or even if you do, you're gonna get there, and not be able to do the work, and not succeed.

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These parents—across both sports—explain a direct connection between strong grades and recruitment appeal, and speak in very concrete terms about how important they believe the academic piece to be to college coaches. For all the emphasis these parents place on education, it is striking that they discuss it in such pragmatic terms. They speak to the importance of academic achievement, but speak of it more often as a means to aiding their recruitability than they do as fundamental to their sons' personal development. This is not to say that these (or any) parents of aspiring elite athletes do not value education or learning for learning's sake, but they clearly articulate school performance as an important input in the process toward reaching a greater goal, which incidentally is to gain access to higher education institutions. Further, the last passage from PH points to the ways in which parents begin to understand how athletes' academic inclinations are perceived. With the weight these families place on performance in school, these stereotypes about athletes and schooling appear somewhat misinformed. That said, GS suggests that while academics may be important to some at the elite level, that importance may not be reflective of the general pattern for the sport:

You know...I have to admit, for basketball, [his son's club team sets] a pretty high standard. The kids they got were pretty high standard kids, and you could tell--it may be just be my personal experience, with two years with them, but it seemed like the parents were all active, and education was a big thing, and it seemed like they got mostly good grades. But I'd say, overall, you know, and I donno how far that goes on the economic, social aspects of it, but when he goes to play on the golf team, it's a different type of situation, it seems like. You know, these kids are privileged, their parents are very active in their academics, and all that, where the basketball--I'd probably compare that to the basketball team here, or the football team, compare it to other athletic teams where you have kids being not eligible, and there's parental problems. Our basketball team here, it seems like every year we got 3 or 4 kids with all kinds of problems with at home, and grades, and barely eligible and all that. We never had those types of problems with the Hoosiers though, it seems like a lot better families, and when you talk to people, especially coaches in recruiting and stuff, and I've asked these questions of how important are parents and the whole educational thing, and if they're a good kid. And everyone of them to a T says it's absolutely imperative, and it's the most important thing you'll find, you know when you see these guys get top-notch kids, versus a kid you see is gonna be a nightmare to deal with, and it usually comes out of a lot of home problems. You see it here in Turlock, I've seen it more in some other types of sports.

Still, for all the talk about the importance of educational accomplishment, coaches at even the most prestigious academic institutions cite the fact that the first thing they look at in the recruitment process is whether a young man can play or not. Moreover, the fact that these families dedicate considerable time and resources to high-quality athletic experiences suggests they also have a firm grasp on the significance of achievement within the sport. Hence, the institutional demands pertaining to sports inputs carry heavy weight.

According to the families, the recruitment process boils down two key elements: talent and exposure. In order to bill themselves as legitimate prospects for college competition, young athletes must pursue the most effective path towards honing their talents, and then identify the best avenues by which they can display those talents to recruiters, coaches, and everyone in between. In this contemporary field, the assumption for these families is that the optimal distribution of the two comes through participation beyond the normal interscholastic infrastructure. While high school varsity sports teams typically require tryouts and often require intense commitment, the fact of the matter is that they are bound by geographical and school district restrictions, as well as limits on resource allocations and eligibility. This means that even the most competitive high school team cannot be sure that it will continuously encounter high-level opposition, nor can it be sure that it will take part in a competitive

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infrastructure that offers ample frequency and stakes for its participants. Consequently, these families understand the legitimacy of truly talented ballplayers to be shaped by participation in a privatized, neoliberal structure, which ensures that not just anyone can access this system. More importantly, it presumes that the system will only facilitate the participation of the best, and hence their child will effectively become one of the best by virtue his individual involvement within it. While there is no guarantee that playing on an elite travel team will make someone a better basketball or lacrosse player, the effective way to look the part is to sign on with some club and register for as many summer “exposure” events as possible.

Despite the fact that these events cannot promise that youth participants will be recruited or offered a scholarship, these families continue to believe in the system.

*GS:* [The most important elements when looking at a club program]: Can they get you in that program, can you play at that level, can you play at Pac-10, can you play in the Big Sky, can you play in the Ivy League. And then they'll come out and watch you play in some open gyms, and they'll come out--just like the Naval Academy--they'll call three or four coaches that Travis plays against in league, which I don't think we've run across that very much lately, you know, at all. They call opposing coaches to see what kind of kid he is, and how does he compete, and what does he do. I think it all started when they first saw him play in Vegas, and not a lot, but they got enough to take their interest, now he wants to come out in September, and watch him take open gym. It just becomes more of college coaches trying to determine, you know, who they want to spend a scholarship on...

*JM:* Well there's a huge difference as far as level of play [between high school and club]. You know, the [club] experience, he gets to play with kids from different backgrounds, from all over the state of California really, mainly Northern California. He gets to play against a really high level of talent that is significantly better than, you know just his high school talent. He's enjoyed his high school playing as well. You know he gets to play for his high school, gets to compete in league play against other high schools. There's just a marked difference in the level of talent, let's say...Finding the right AAU program that is gonna help him get better, that he's gonna have fun playing with the guys, and that also gives him opportunities with respect to exposure.

*MM:* ...In soccer, you almost can't find a kid on a high school team at the successful programs that is not also playing club. The more kids you find on a high school team that are playing club, that becomes a way to gauge how successful a team will be. We're starting to see lacrosse move in that direction. Baseball does it, softball has it. I think lacrosse is probably gonna get to that point soon, because if you look at the organizational structure of most of these youth leagues, the same guys who are doing soccer in the fall are doing lacrosse in the spring, they're on the same boards.

*SS:* [My son] nows what he needs to do to get [recruited to play at the college level], including playing on a travel club team and trying out for tournaments such as adidas.

These parents feel confident that through these channels their children will continue to improve as athletes, and will have ample opportunities to display their talents for college recruiters. From this standpoint, the elite club circuit becomes a sound investment that allows parents to pour in whatever resources necessary and available to set their sons apart from the general population at the high school level. At first glance, this appears to describe largely technical elements, until one considers there are several avenues through which young athletes can have their skills: practice in the backyard; instructional camps; recreational leagues; and impromptu games with friends. For example, the majority of history's best NBA players never had access to the infrastructure/opportunity structure available to youth today, and yet they still displayed unparalleled technical abilities. Hence, the contemporary elite youth infrastructure is not a prerequisite for technical skill enhancement, nor is there a stable expectation of the degree to which it may boost individual technical abilities. Still, with the

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investment approach comes differences in inputs, which naturally results in inequalities. MM offers a sobering account of how socio-economic stratification plays out in this environment:

It depends on how much you can afford, really. When it comes right down to it. So if you're not comin from a middle-to-upper socioeconomic background, or you're [not] willing to devote those resources to that, it's gonna be tougher to crack the ice.

For the upper-end, for the elite kids, we're talking top 200, ] [adidas] opened up an opportunity that wasn't there before [beyond] very few people. There's some schools on the West Coast like St. Ignatius where kids are highly recruited...and those kids were well-off, because it cost a lot of money to go to school there. So there's a difference between the public schools and the private schools as far as access, money, whatever you wanna call it. The network is pretty localized in the public school realm, so you're playing for your county, you're playing for the North Coast Section, so that's where your visibility is. ...There are a some ranking systems out there, on a couple websites--laxpower comes to mind--where you can see how you measure up (teams), and coaches can look at that...So if you're just a basic player and your team went to the playoffs, and even won the North Coast Section, and didn't go to the camps, you're not gonna get into the network of people.

Of course, the stratification represents the fundamental element in making this elite field worthwhile. An inclusive participation model ultimately defeats the purpose, and nullifies the need for a private market.

In the end, some families may not only come to devalue the more inclusive interscholastic system, but they may even resolve to circumvent it altogether. DK elaborates:

I would say generally parents are gonna want their kids to be successful in school, but for example, I was down in Atlanta to see a guy named Derrick Favors, who's gonna be a top pick next year, he'll be a freshman at Georgia Tech next year. I was down seeing him in Atlanta in the ACC tournament, I went to one of the high school championship deals, met some kid and his father, and he was supposedly one of the best kids in Atlanta, but I got confused because his team was playing next, but he wasn't. He was ineligible, and didn't get along with the coach. So my main point is I can see where someone can say. "You know, high school doesn't really matter as much. If I can get my shit together and play AAU, you know, that's where I'm gonna get my look anyway." Though if you don't have the credits, you're never gonna play college basketball.

Despite the fact that the parents in this study largely report that the academic experience is of the utmost importance to them as well as the recruiting process, the deregulated private market allows greater latitude for individual athletes to neglect their schoolwork and eligibility requirements under the expectation that they will get ample chances to display their talents during the summer travel circuit. Although so many parents and coaches reiterate that even the best players cannot play in college without strong academic standing, the market environment generates so many pressures for all actors involved that there are still incentives to make exceptions (or worse) for the most decorated stars.

Examining the institutional demands parents and athletes within the field face highlights a larger underlying paradox. These families believe they must do whatever they can to set themselves apart from the larger population, yet at the same time part of the steps they take towards this end involves having to do what everyone else who shares those goals does in order to appear legitimate. Consequently, in this market environment distinction is largely determined by the difference in inputs, either contributed themselves or on their behalf. Thus, it is fair to say that such an environment creates incentives for growing inequality. Incidentally, even as DK describes being struck by parents placing so much stock in the private elite travel circuit, the apparel companies are hardly immune to the very institutional pressures the families encounter.

*Apparel company*

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As much as families continue to invest the private travel circuit in order for their young athletes to increase their odds of reaching their goals, the adidas has done so at a level of much higher magnitude. Yet, for all of the technical-efficiency concerns centered on profits associated with this corporate actor, the institutional justifications appear to carry greater emphasis than the explicit projected technical benefits. For whatever potential revenue it offers, the grassroots marketing approach is primarily rooted in the pursuit of legitimacy and compliance with normative behaviors. As mentioned in earlier chapters, this marketing model is intended to “get the kid that gets the kid”. None of the corporate representatives interviewed in this study provides concrete figures on the expected return on investment for the various events they put on. Rather, they operate on a theory of action centered on a particular series of expected behaviors. Elite players hoping to display their talents to top college coaches will attend their events, gain exposure to their products, and do some combination of three things: 1) develop an affinity for the product such that they will continue to wear and/or buy it; 2) share positive experiences about products and/or the company with their non-elite peers; and 3) establish relationships with the company earlier on that may lead to lucrative business relationships down the road. What is particularly striking about this system—particularly on the basketball side—is that it originated less as a result of technical research and more due to the urgings of a select few.

The story of the beginnings of grassroots basketball as run by major sports apparel corporations in the United States is as startlingly unconventional as it is fascinating. The entire system has come about within the last two-and-a-half decades, essentially as a result of the will of one savvy individual with an ambitious vision (Wetzel & Yaeger, 2000). Sonny Vaccaro was able to leverage his relationships with key figures within the basketball world in order to deliver Michael Jordan—an avid adidas-wearer at the time—to sign an endorsement deal with Nike following his final year at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. The rest would be history, as Jordan’s individual line of shoes would easily become the most lucrative athletic shoe in history (Smit, 2008; Wetzel & Yaeger, 2000). This granted Vaccaro a tremendous amount of capital with which to push forward his daring business ideas. Perhaps one of the most influential concepts he asserted during his time with Nike (who eventually hired him as a consultant) was the idea that Nike had lucked out in establishing a relationship with Jordan, an eventual global sports icon who had spent his formative years wearing the logo of one of their fiercest competitors. Vaccaro warned that most mega-stars would not be so quick to waver in their brand loyalty by the time they had left college, thus underscoring the importance of establishing relationships earlier on. Hence, the story of the origins of the elite summer event infrastructure as an institutional foothold for apparel companies in pursuit of market share within the basketball realm is a story of the quest for legitimacy more so than a strategy towards technical efficiency.

Vaccaro would eventually leave Nike to start up a grassroots infrastructure at adidas, which came in the form of the invitation-only ABCD basketball camp in the early 1990s.<sup>12</sup> This event would actively compete with Nike’s invitational event during the summer evaluation period. Thus, by the time Vaccaro had left adidas, centralized elite summer activities sponsored

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<sup>12</sup> Vaccaro would eventually work with no less than four different apparel companies over the years, leveraging his experience in order to get the opportunity to develop each one’s grassroots system.

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by apparel companies had become the gold standard for the college basketball recruiting environment. Just as important, it became the primary avenue through which colleges, agents, and shoe companies could establish intimate relationships with the most talented players and their families. DK, who began at adidas working under Vaccaro, eventually took charge of grassroots basketball marketing after his boss left for another company. His account of how he elected to proceed underscores the deep-seated institutionalism within this corporate environment.

So I was getting a lot of pressure to see how could we do this different. I looked again at all the reasons why--the reasons why Sonny did all these things, there were positive things in this for the company, so let's look at what those positives were and how we could achieve these positive things for the company in other ways. The model I came up with was--how do I get to the players and establish these relationships. It's an elite thing, the same way camps did it, but do it in a different way. And that's when I came up with the system, adidas Nations. At the time, you really determined what kind of kid you were by the events you went to. The camp, the tournament, and the all-star game. What if you could determine what kind of kid you were based upon--like let's create a national team--I play for an adidas national team, like an AAU team, but with the 15-best in the class. So we created this.

Incidentally, CR would go with Vaccaro to Reebok prior to returning to adidas. Reebok had been acquired by adidas, but still had no tangible grassroots marketing infrastructure. Thus, they hoped Vaccaro could utilize his reputation in the basketball world to bring in superstar talent with whom the company could sign endorsement contracts once they became professionals. CR explains the similar institutional process he went through in attempting to build a new grassroots system:

When I came into Reebok in '03, they didn't have the camps, we didn't have the camps until July of '04. We had to get that network of coaches together across the country before July of '04. People say it's all about money, it's not about money, it's about who people feel comfortable with. There's only so much money, so there's only so much that you can spend...it's how well you create relations, how well you return phone calls, how well you get to emails, how quickly you get documents to people, how comfortable people feel with you...

...People always go, how do you measure, how do you know you're not just wasting money? And it's like, you know what, you could look at it that way, but I can always tell you how bad would it be if you didn't have it? How bad would your visibility be if nobody was talkin about you? Because you can read stuff about our camps on the internet. You can't read much about Reebok shoes, but you can read about the camps. You can't read much about our athletes..but these events that we do obviously generate a lot of blogs and a lot of viral marketing, people talk about it because you touch so many kids across the country, it becomes an event that people aspire to...if people are talking about it, that's the whole role of marketing, you want people to talk about what you're doing.

These basketball marketing directors believe legitimacy trumps the technical aspects or even endorsement considerations. Hence, they were able to acquire considerable resources and autonomy in order to pursue the market strategy that one man initially pressed forward with little data on its returns in revenue over time. Nevertheless, even these directors acknowledge that it is the legitimacy piece that is fundamental to this realm of business, and that it is legitimacy that creates business incentives for individuals like Vaccaro to continue to build up the grassroots infrastructure. DK clearly encapsulates this concept in the following passage:

And at the same time, Tom Shine, who's the head of sports marketing for Reebok, said "I see." He was going to the ABCD Camp, he was seeing that "shit, we're paying all this money to Allen Iverson, and this and that, and we're the major supplier to the NBA, but kids, they need--grassroots...is important, because it legitimizes yourself as a basketball brand." You know, all these kids, they're looking at Allen Iverson, he wears Reebok because he gets paid the most by them. But if you wanna be real, you need to be at the grassroots level. And Sonny told him, "Well if you want me, here's what it's gonna take." And he fuckin' wrote the check for big-time money: "We need [Marketing Rep], I need my people need to come over with me." And what his plan was--[from Sonny's perspective] "I'm gonna leave the major guys at adidas, but I'll

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control them. adidas will pay them, and I'll get them to send their kids to my camp, and I'll get them to send the teams to my tournament. They'll get involved with grassroots, but they'll do what they'll do. What I'm gonna do is take all this money, and I'm gonna go get some motherfuckers right now."

Clearly, the basketball field is marked by intense competition and palpable antipathy among certain actors and organizations. What is remarkable is that such an institutional field with such high financial stakes can be driven by such volatile normative behaviors and expectations. With that said, while the lacrosse field does not appear nearly as antagonistic or borne of the vision of a mere few individuals, it too appears to be built on a foundation of normativity.

Without the animated personalities and mega-stars behind its origins, adidas youth lacrosse is still a grassroots system rooted in responding to institutional demands. JB explains the process that went into developing the recruitment education aspect of their event, as he is a former college wrestling coach and his partner has had considerable experience in the lacrosse world:

*Interviewer:* Did that come as a recognition of a demand from families themselves, or did that come from something that college coaches were saying was a good idea, or did it come from your own innovation?

*JB:* Well there's been a lot of different recruiting services out there, and essentially the recruiting service is a mass-mail marketing-type effort to college coaches, and they charge a fee to the parents to "get the kid signed up and we're gonna market your son." What we wanted to do was--and Joel developed the idea, but as a former college coach, what I tried to do was give him input as to what some of the holdups and drawbacks were, as far as what you're inundated with, and try to give some idea of, "here's what they're looking for, here's what would be of value in this thing that you have developed", and Joel kinda tweaked it that way. And essentially, that portion or that concept isn't new.

As the ANLC is still a relatively new event, there is also a particular orientation with regards to whose demands and needs take precedence as they continue to fine-tune their system. As they continue to construct the metric with which they can measure the fiscal impact of the ANLC (essentially measuring any changes in sales of lacrosse apparel and equipment prior to and following the tournament), their prime concern remains to establish the legitimacy of the event. Ultimately, they must proceed this way until they can be sure that top players and top college coaches will consider their event without pause. As JB elaborates, peer group endorsements are critical in ensuring this happens:

The vendors and the sponsors and all of those entities are also essential, we need to try and keep them happy so they'll keep coming back, so that's the resources and the dollars we need to be able to give the student athletes and the coaches all the extra stuff that they want. So it's a juggling act, but I would say the key people who we need to please first are, make sure the college coaches are happy so that they can come back, make sure the participants had a good experience so they continue to come back and spread the word...and what we do is we take their input and find out--you know a lot of it is, "Oh, there's a need." For instance, for next year, the parents said, of the teams that were 0-2, "You know, we paid a lot of money, we flew in from Northern California, our team isn't as competitive here as it is in the Mid-Atlantic, we paid all this money to come out for four days and our kids play two games, and some of the college coaches didn't even show up for the second day, when the Elite 8 were there, so my kid didn't get an opportunity to get seen."

What becomes evident here is that the survival of units such as JB's hinge as much on perception and legitimacy as they do on dollars and cents, if not more. Consequently, one would expect that concerns around technical efficiency might give way to those centered on visibility and popularity. Finally, one set of demands all parties must be aware of is compliance with NCAA regulations. Even though the field is largely unregulated, the events must be certified by the NCAA, per its regulation of the recruiting period. College coaches are certainly aware of these NCAA-imposed requirements.

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### *College coaches*

Of all the actors in these elite youth sports fields, college coaches may very well have the most to lose from any sort of NCAA violation, and at the same time they appear to be the most susceptible to slip up. As mentioned earlier in this write-up, the NCAA makes a concerted effort to ensure that event organizers eliminate any opportunities for college coaches and families to make inappropriate contact with one another. At the basketball events, compliance representatives play a key role in seeing this regulation through. Moreover, if there is in fact some unpermitted contact that takes place, even at the initiation of a player or family member, the system is set up such that there are greater consequences for the coaches. Hence, the responsibility ultimately rests on the shoulders of the coaches to avoid any unauthorized activities. Nevertheless, on-site compliance is not the most wearisome aspect of NCAA regulation that these coaches discuss.

Now that the open evaluation period is limited to only one summer month, the coaches interviewed say they must work harder to compete with peer programs and maximize their recruiting efforts. The open period allows coaches to view players during one sanctioned summer month, often at the same events as their contemporaries. In addition to being restricted from offering differentiated compensation or gifts to lure players, they are also limited in making contact with players outside of the permitted periods. Without the opportunity to evaluate talent in the month of April, they are now limited in their ability to travel the country and see far-away prospects during a time when all their contemporaries may not be around. Thus, there is a paradox in that the limited recruiting period has largely brought coaches across the nation together in the same places for a short time, yet coaches at smaller schools with fewer resources lament that it can actually exacerbate inequalities among schools. That is, when coaches from most of the schools are all present in one place, the bigger schools with the greater prominence and available resources will overshadow the smaller ones. Thus, coaches from smaller schools must devise ways to distinguish themselves. SJ describes the interaction between these institutional pressures and the inequalities inherent within the system:

I think as there's more and more tournaments, there's more and more pressures on colleges to cover those tournaments, and they just don't have the resources to do that. Whereas the wealthier institutions, the ones with the bigger athletic budgets, that's not a problem. So you start hearing tales of how a coach can go back and forth between two particular tournaments in one day, because he or she has access to some sort of charter jet that the school is providing them, and I can tell you that's atypical in the Ivy League, and probably atypical in a lot of leagues. So, if that gives an advantage for a coach, in terms of recruiting, we gotta look at that. You know, does that make a lot of sense. I think we'd all be willing to jump on a charter flight. I don't think that means the guy or gal is working any harder, we just can't afford to that. We are not empowered to do that by our institution. So, is that fair, I hesitate to use that word, but I don't know if it is. Is there any distinction between any institution or certain leagues? It's negligible. I'm not trying to underestimate the value of sleeping in a nicer hotel, or driving a roomier car, or navigating certain tournaments. You know, it can't all be the same exact experience for everyone, but if the experience is influenced by a lot of dollars and that significantly impacts your ability to evaluate, not necessarily recruit, but just evaluate, we need to look at that.

In the end, college coaches (in any sport) face a litany of pressures that originate from multiple sources. On end, external organizations such as the NCAA create limitations around their ability to do their work. On the other end, they must satisfy demands within their organization to win games and bring in revenue, all the while developing their players into better players and better people. Throughout all this, they must navigate a highly competitive



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and limited recruitment process through which they can attract the most capable young players to come in and preserve their programs. With the high level of visibility for the basketball coaches in particular, much of their work involves keeping tabs on what their competitors are doing and ensuring that they are in position to keep up. Incidentally, this charge does not differ a great deal from that faced by the other group of coaches in this study: club coaches.

### *Club coaches*

Given the relative instability of club organizations mentioned before, it is critical that they establish legitimacy among the other actors within the field. Hence, it is clear that the various institutional demands they face originate from actors across the board. They must strike a running balance between fielding a competitive team, maintaining a high-status among other clubs, and showcasing their roster of players enough to catch the attention of college coaches. In short, appearances matter a great deal. One of the first things a club coach must do is establish a system by which to recruit talented players for the team. This process may start as early as elementary school for some kids, and continues throughout players' high school careers. This is due not only to the pressures of identifying the best players as early as possible, but also in some part to the fact that they believe they must reach their people earlier in order to counteract potential educational and environmental shortcomings:

*CF:* You also look for kids that you feel you still can reach, meaning they're not so far behind academically, that their ability to make that a realistic goal is possible while they're in high school. So in some cases that's why it's great to catch them when they're in seventh or eighth grade...So there's a wide variety of how you can end up coming across a young person, and the basketball landscape is getting sophisticated enough to where you can't hide too long. If you're pretty good, somebody's gonna at some point talk about you, bring your name up, and they'll find out who they think can help that young person make the next step. Some cases, people wanna keep them, cuz their pride says hey, I wanna help them, I wanna be the person that makes this happen, but in most cases people just realize there's a point where I don't have the experience or the resources to take them to that next stage, so let me find someone who does. And that's when we get phone calls or invitations to come see kids.

*RY:* Honestly, personally, I've been dealing with a lot of kids over the last 8-10 years...I would say a lot of these kids are not really learning what they need to learn in high school, and I know that because when they get ready to take the SAT test, their scores are coming back so low, that they're not getting the basics. A lot of kids don't get past Algebra 2...Sometimes they can't write complete sentences. I don't think they're getting, I don't think the schools are doing a good enough job. I think there's a lot of babysitting going on at the high school. I think teachers are scared of the kids, at this point, so they just let them come in the classroom. If you get , you get it, and if you don't, you don't. I'm not just speaking to Oakland Public Schools, I'm speaking to all schools. Maybe not in the Catholic schools, but in a lot of the public schools they're not doing a good enough job making sure these kids get enough information to succeed and be able to get through college. I think a lot of these kids are going to struggle when they get to college. That's why we try to get tutors. ..cuz when you don't get the fundamentals...you can't do college work.

Consequently, one of the overarching demands these basketball coaches describe is the need to provide support for their players that extends beyond the basketball court, and accordingly the importance of reaching potential participants earlier on in their lives, affording them a higher probability of successful intervention. To that end, in some cases, they even establish relationships with faculty and staff at their players' schools. Still, once the coaches identify and recruit their players, they must juggle the various competitive requirements for the team with the individual needs of each player and his family.

Much like the coaches at the college level, club coaches' jobs largely revolve around constantly establishing a positive perception of the work they do. Even as they work to compile

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and train winning teams, they have to do whatever is necessary to demonstrate their legitimacy as elite-level actors, worthy of the best available resources and participants. This means they must balance player goals, off-the-court needs, and the overall team image:

*CF:* You gotta learn how to navigate and manage what the individual goals are for these kids once they get to high school, as opposed to these nice corporate goals everybody thinks you should have in sixth, seventh, eighth grade. It's all about winning, and team chemistry, and having fun, and everybody respects you cuz you got great coaches. But by this time, the parents are focused on their individual agendas: how does my kid get a free education. Because there's a larger percentage of parents who think their kids are gonna make it than there are kids who can pull it off. Because people think it's the kids. I'm here to tell you there's a larger percentage of the parents that are focused on that, than even some of the kids.

*RY:* Now I need you in the gym for AAU season, working out, getting stronger, getting better, and playing for the scouts. At the same time, now your high school coach isn't telling you, "Do your homework, keep your grades up", now it's our turn to say, "Make sure you go get that homework done. Before you get here--we practice at 6--3:30-5:30 you should be workin on that homework, then when we're done you go home and finish it off." A lot of high school coaches don't like their players playing AAU and they think because they get bad habits. I think it depends on who's coaching them whether they get bad habits or not. I think if you ask anybody to help you, they will. It's based on individuals. I wouldn't say so much a school, but I would say a teacher at the school. But we do have to deal with teachers at the school...You kinda have to build a relationship with people so they can help you get the paperwork you need to get to coaches and whatnot.

*GA:* [For his club team] We bring our 22-man roster to two different events. One of them, we fly in and out of Philadelphia and then in and out of DC. They're fully-clothed all the way down to T-shirt, sweatshirt, reversible penny, shorts, helmets...entrance into both events, transportation to and from airports, dorm rooms that we're staying in, hotels, if we have an extra night.

GA's excerpt speaks to the costs associated with his lacrosse trips but it also very much speaks to the ways in which the team demonstrates its legitimacy as a West Coast club when they make trips to the East Coast, the hub for elite lacrosse.

DK asserts that the way a team is outfitted often plays a significant role in how an organization goes about establishing its legitimacy, particularly within a system largely driven by apparel companies. He points out that companies can only afford to sponsor a limited amount of teams, and yet in the basketball realm sponsorship is a significant status marker for elite club teams. Hence, coaches of those teams that are not sponsored may make alternative fundraising efforts so they can fully outfit their clubs.

*Interviewer:* So you're saying programs fundraise to buy the adidas products so that from the kid and family's side it looks like they're sponsored?

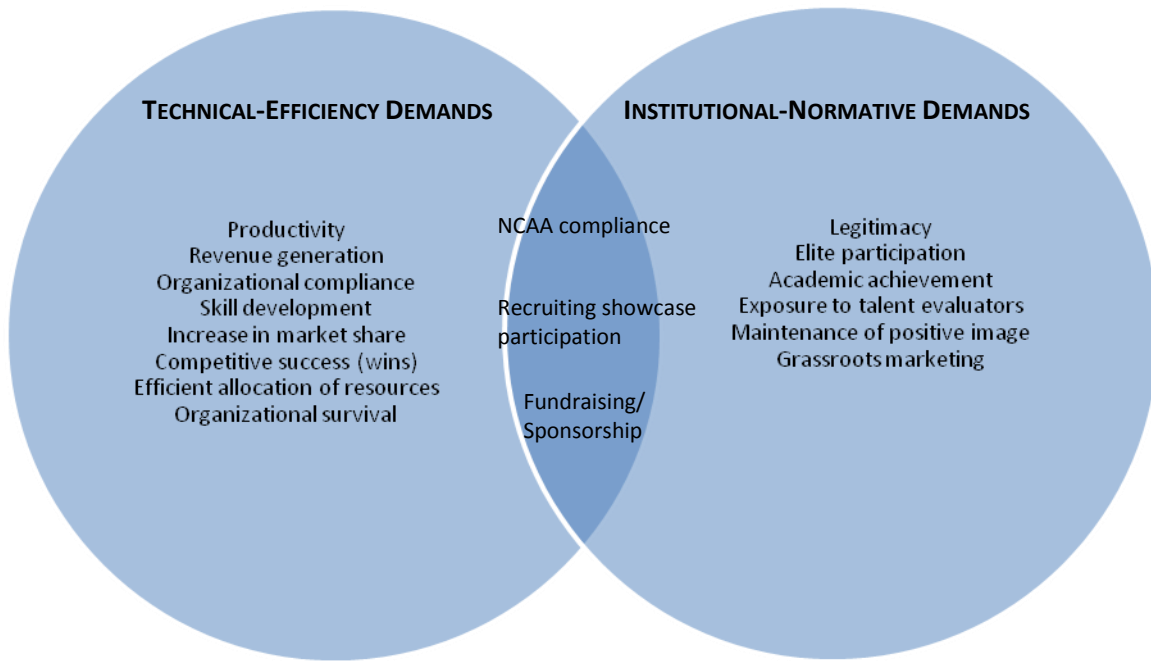
*DK:* Yeah, yeah. We've done that. Now, the other thing is. If I'm the [West Coast club team]--they have a bus that says "[West Coast Club Team]" on it, have you seen that deal? That's pretty cool. If I'm on the Bay Area Hoosiers and I arrive at the gym--when I see the Atlantic Celtics--which is one of our major sponsored teams--Pump n' Run, in the old days it was EBO--there were these teams that were really good, and they were all wearing special uniforms and special shoes, and those motherfuckers said like this, "Damn man, I wanna be like that." That is also part of the method to our madness. So I wanna have, I need to have the wannabes there. Because they're the ones who gotta look at the trendsetters to adopt. Those are the guys that wanna say, "Shit, I wanna be like that." The coach said that. The [West Coast club team] coach made a conscious effort to be an adidas team, because there was no adidas team in the area, so he could make everyone believe that he is. And that's sometimes how it works. Those kids feel like, "I'm part of the adidas team", even though they're really not.

This explanation highlights the various business and power dynamics at play for the various actors within this field. The instability of the club system generates legitimacy pressures on coaches that effectively benefit the apparel company and even the players. At the same time, these coaches have little control over whether or not they receive sponsorship—even if they

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are extremely organized and competitive—as the sponsorship system is built on scarcity and exclusivity. Still, as much as the club coach may need his elite team outfitted in quality apparel, the apparel company needs that coach to purchase the equipment that will ultimately bring in real revenue for the company. Further, without that equipment available, a club may lose top talent to another sponsored program that appears to be more legitimate.

**Figure 2.** Distinctions between technical-efficiency and institutional-normative demands



Ultimately, in thinking about these sports environments as institutional fields, each actor feels and applies pressures such that they at some point balance privilege with disadvantage. While there are very real technical requirements that each must fulfill in order to function in their respective capacity, the interaction of the various institutional demands largely drive the behaviors of each actor. Consequently, the varying dynamics can lead actors to behave in ways that may seem inefficient, unjustified, and even intrinsically detrimental. Yet the success or even survival of an organization or individual entity within the field does not merely depend on the ability to produce outputs based on optimal levels of inputs. Much depends on the capacity to satisfy a litany of expectations taken for granted within the field. On one hand, it is true that these expectations are mired in a real power dynamic. To influence these demands is to exercise some degree of power, while adhering to them in some ways denotes a marginalized position. Yet, it would be an oversimplification to argue that one type of actor—particularly the apparel company—is all-powerful because of its available resources.

Each actor alternates between asserting her or his own demands and responding to others'. Moreover, there are instances in which it may be unclear whether the nature of a particular practice or dynamic is technical or institutional in nature, as it may appear technical only because it has been legitimized over time. To further illustrate this, Figure 2 utilizes a Venn

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diagram to highlight the distinctions and overlaps between technical and institutional demands. It also depicts the larger theme of this chapter: individuals may pursue a litany of decisions that oscillate between appearing reasonable and irrational, but they all follow a particular model toward goal attainment. This is important to keep in mind when considering how it could be that parents or other adults may elect to place their children in highly competitive environments and/or costly institutions in order to afford them more educational opportunities. They encounter a series of expectations that inform the means to reaching their ends. Additionally, it is not for them to merely engage and accept these expectations. As a means of survival, each actor finds a way to adapt to institutional requirements within the field. Finally, as they are active participants within the field, they simultaneously shape its demands. The next chapter explores this idea in further detail.

## **Chapter 6— How do these core actors respond to these technical-efficiency and institutional-normative demands in this field?**

As Chapter 5 describes the various demands that shape these youth athletic institutional fields, Chapter 6 charts the different responses to them. At different points each actor must confront pressures to reinforce its legitimacy, while simultaneously working to increase its technical capacity. Whereas this mix of requirements highlights underlying power dynamics within the field, there is no single category of actors that determines what they are. Each encounters notions of what constitutes legitimate behavior based on a series of taken-for-granted standards and expectations that have solidified over time. Families are concerned with ensuring that their children attend the right events and maintain their grades at an attractive level; apparel companies worry about how to establish meaningful relationships with athletes and coaches while competing with core organizations; and coaches balance the demands of training winning with maintaining a positive public perception. Accordingly, as a means of surviving and advancing within the field, they must all respond to the litany of pressures they face by either adapting their behaviors or utilizing whatever leverage they have in order to further shape the demands on others. The question then becomes to what degree each actor's orientation to demands is responsive as opposed to proactive. Chapter 6 investigates the mechanisms through which core actors within the field engage and subsequently respond to the various demands they encounter.

### *Participants*

Within the elite youth sports field, participants and their families seek to gain access to college through recruitment and whatever financial aid possible. To that end, the normative course of action has been to participate in as many high-level national events as possible outside of the interscholastic season, particularly during the summer months. Families pour in a great deal of resources and energy into identifying and trying out for the best travel clubs, honing their skills, and attempting to gain exposure to college coaches. Accordingly, with all of the pressures before them, participants identify ways to keep pace and ultimately advance toward their goals.

Although basketball and lacrosse are both team sports, the fact remains that colleges rarely look to recruit talented teams, but rather seek out gifted individuals. This is evidenced by the fact that the outcomes of the individual games at these recruiting showcases garner relatively little attention. For example: there was no scoreboard or game clock visible to spectators at the ANLC; there were clocks and small scorecards at the basketball events, but the results and standings were not prominently displayed; and at both events the bulk of college coaches had already left town by the time the most critical elimination games of the tournaments had begun (most coaches had to leave early to catch a portion of the next showcase event). Finally, it follows that individual performance trumps team success, as it is not only the eventual tournament champions who receive recruitment letters and/or scholarship offers. Dozens (and in the case of the basketball events, hundreds) of college coaches come out to find at least one new player to add to their program, whether that player wins or not. Consequently, players and their families adapt by taking the initiative to do their own marketing to college programs.

### **Family marketing**

## Chapter 6— How do these core actors respond to these technical-efficiency and institutional-normative demands in this field?

With the availability of fewer overall resources and the presence of far less Division I teams, family-driven marketing appears to be more prevalent in lacrosse than in basketball. GA points out that this is especially the case on the West Coast:

But I would say that less than five percent of the kids that pick up a lacrosse stick in California truly have a chance of matriculating and playing Division I lacrosse. As many players as I have seen actively recruited, I've seen countless more that are the active recruiter that are calling the coaches, sending the videos, pounding the pavement: "If I get there, can I walk on? If I walk on, what are the odds of me ever playing?", you know. And so it's gotta be—it's a two-way system right now. There are very few California players that have been outwardly recruited...they have to do a little bit more work on the West Coast.

Of course, this is not just a Californian phenomenon, nor is it exclusive to lacrosse. The ANLC and Super 64 events both featured vendor booths occupied by online recruitment support services designed to assist families in developing accessible profiles for individual athletes seeking to put out attractive packages to college coaches. Those who do not opt to purchase the professional video footage that these recruiting services make available can record games using their own equipment, which will allow them to put together highlight reels for their recruiting profiles. In researching the recruiting process TA found that it would not only be more cost effective to utilize her own video, but also to purchase her own video editing software, and build and post her son's profile herself. Still, the marketing process does not only involve outreach to college coaches. Club coaches from well-known programs such as CF's and grassroots marketing directors report receiving several calls and emails each year from parents hoping to alert them to their sons' underappreciated talents. CR explains: "Parents call you and email you--email's been great but it's also been a nightmare, because anybody can get to you now." In this way, participants respond to the uncertainties of the college recruitment process by taking initiative to apprise the necessary parties of their deservingness of an opportunity to play their sport at the college level. Even so, the process of determining what that sport is can be another form of adaptation.

### Shift in emphasis on sport

Up to this point the contemporary grassroots youth sports infrastructure has been described as a highly commercialized, neoliberal field that allows families to apply whatever resources they can in order to maximize their chances for college access. Nevertheless, at some point, there is only so much investing that a family can do if the talent level is inadequate. Hence, one form of adaptation participants employ is shifting their emphasis from one sport to another in which they might have a higher probability of success and recruitment. The fact of the matter is that the nation's most top revenue sports—basketball, football, and baseball—are the most popular, and thus present the worst odds for advancement to an elite level. Thus, those families may shift their thinking:

*Interviewer:* Do you find parents starting early off making decisions about sports with better odds than say basketball or football?

GS: Oh sure, oh yeah, you see that. You know, at least the bright ones do. I mean I have some people that--you talk to tons of parents that actually have no clue about athletics. They say, "I saw this kid play, and he's Pac-10 material", and it's like, you have no clue. There's other parents and other kids who, after a certain point, especially in high school, there's a defining moment, because you kinda see where your kid is physically, and what skill sets he may have. Is he quick, big, fast, strong, what's his mental aptitude, and decide whether their kids can play...You do see that, you do see where parents will say, "you know what, there's no way. My kid's 5'2". He loves basketball, but he's slow, he doesn't have lateral movement, he's tiny...", and next thing you know you'll find him playin' water polo, or soccer, or whatever, you know. So you definitely, you do see that, and that's great, I mean at least a kid, you know, they're finding something

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where hopefully he can be successful. I mean when you look at the amount of percentage of players that can go to play at any level after high school, it's miniscule at best, so I think it's important that he at least get something in high school that he can have a good time and play well at, so I have no problem with that.

A sport like lacrosse is the beneficiary of this sort of shift. The fact that it is the fastest-growing high school sport for young men and women is a testament to the recognition on the part of families and their children that there are other sports that present greater odds with less average experience. In fact, TK remarks that his teams have benefited from the participation of talented athletes from other competitive sports such as football and baseball. Further, LA notes that even at the apparel level they are aware of such behavior:

Have I seen kids focusing on--kids who were big time soccer, select kids, all the way through, get through their sophomore year and decide I'm not on anyone's radar for a big time soccer scholarship but I'm a lacrosse player, I think I'll focus a little more on lacrosse now, because I might have a shot at getting some money somewhere from a lacrosse program? I've definitely seen some of that.

Still, this phenomenon is indicative of the degree to which families are willing to strategize in order to navigate the underlying pressures they face within this field. What is more, a shift in sport may also serve as a status indicator, as youth from poorer backgrounds may not have the luxury of switching from a relatively inexpensive or subsidized activity to one with significantly greater operational costs. Apparel companies such as adidas no longer worry about the cost effectiveness associated with investment in one sport or another—provided that the sport is viable at the intercollegiate level—but they do devote considerable resources to adapting to other demands.

### *Apparel company*

As discussed in earlier chapters, the grassroots marketing campaigns that drive elite high school recruiting events come from organizational divisions that operate separate from the mainstream corporate structure. Accordingly, they must vie for the resources and autonomy necessary to sustain their department. In describing the adaptive cycle associated with organizational responses to environmental change and uncertainty, Miles and Snow (2003) outline four fundamental behavior types: defender, prospector, reactor, and analyzer. In applying these types to examine how the youth marketing staff adapt, these actors might be best classified as defender-prospectors. Defenders aim to maintain and defend the organizational structure as it is (by increasing technological efficiency, while keeping the technology the same), particularly in the face of significant environmental change. The prospector behavior entails boundary-spanning and seeking new developments that might actually create change in the field; it's also highly de-centralized and operates with less regard for efficiency. In developing infrastructure for basketball and lacrosse, these adidas personnel work to protect their jobs as well as the capacity to access the resources necessary for them to achieve their organizational goals.

### **Organizational defender**

For those who work in basketball marketing, the usefulness of their work has always been called into question by others within the larger organization. To be sure, the adidas grassroots basketball division has over time enjoyed the advantage of operating in a highly decentralized context, with little attention toward the more conventional management strategies typically associated with profit-driven corporations. While this makes the division a

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target for reform, CR believes his corporate counterparts lack the capacity to grasp the benefits of the elite grassroots approach:

The larger institution doesn't get it. They just get what they see on the internet. It's kinda like, you guys are kinda doing this, but they don't get it....if you're a financial guy dealing with spreadsheets and numbers, they're going, it's just a basketball camp, how integrated can it be, it's just a basketball camp. That's because they're not in it. They can't understand the real network, they're more concerned about well, I heard this was going on, I heard that was going on, mostly just highlighting the negative and not talking about the positive. We're like the CIA, we're like the part of the government, that no one wants to talk about, unless you're in it. We're like this little unit that gets all this presence, and everyone's fine with it, but nobody wants to talk about it.

This passage highlights the paradoxical relationship endemic to this particular sector. Without top-down organizational support for its strategy, not only can the basketball division not function, it also effectively loses its mission. However, doing away with their elite participatory infrastructure could effectively mean the corporation would lose its most effective strategy for product exposure. In any case, DK believes the system in place works, even despite the adjustments he has had to make in light of economic challenges:

Every year they're telling me you have less and less to work with, that's what you have to be laser-focused with the shotgun approach, as opposed to spraying the machine gun, like I gotta kill a lot of....birds with one stone. To me, I can spend the same amount of money and spray it all around, but making an impact, I gotta be with those 15 players from each class--there's 30 total players--and I gotta be with a handful of AAU teams that matter. To me, the [elite sponsored travel team] matter, the [non-sponsored travel club] don't really matter. I really believe this [system] works, man. A lot of it is talking to people, and who knows, I'd love to be able to quantify it, but I think it works.

Hence, in advancing their institutional strategy to defend their practices as legitimate, DK elucidates how they have had to bend to the fiscal requirements handed down by higher-ups and adapt their strategy to reflect a more optimal allocation of resources.

Even as they interact with fewer young people over time, these marketing directors believe they have established a deep-seated legitimacy within the basketball world, such that they present their employers' best opportunities to develop positive brand awareness. This belief is supported by the fact that, after USA Basketball posted a third-place finish at the world Championships in Japan in 2006, the basketball arm of the Olympic Committee called an emergency meeting that convened all the major leaders from the various levels of the sport to discuss how to improve youth basketball (Thamel, 2006). That a third-place finish prompted an emergency meeting of the sport's most powerful actors is remarkable on its own; that these handsomely-compensated individuals tied their discontent to supposed shortcomings in youth basketball is even more remarkable; and that representatives from adidas and Nike were invited is a testament to their standing within the youth sports field, as well as the general basketball infrastructure. Thus, regardless of how efficiently they operate, CR and DK are justified in asserting that their work has established adidas as an undeniable presence in the basketball landscape. Further, they are able to utilize this sort of information as a means toward protecting their position within the larger corporation. Incidentally, the lacrosse division faces a different internal dynamic.

As a primary employee of an external firm contracted to operate adidas' grassroots marketing, JB does not encounter the same acrimony toward his division as his basketball counterparts. This can be attributed to the fact that, contrary to the inception of the basketball division, adidas approached JB's firm with a clear, top-down vision of how such a strategy would be beneficial. Consequently, there has been no need to justify their work within the



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organizational hierarchy, as it was the organizational hierarchy who laid out the terms of their activities. Still, the lacrosse division enjoys considerable autonomy in its day-to-day operations, given advance approval of strategic plans prior to their implementation:

... And adidas America basically said lacrosse, field hockey, and wrestling were under our umbrella, and anything we wanted to do--our development on that--would fall under our responsibility, and they encouraged it in that we would need to run approval of all such events and development of any types of programs through them to make sure we're staying in line with the corporate identity and such. That was really the brainchild of the Henson Group...But as far as development on how we brand the event and such, that was pretty much done on our own, with approval...so we were kind of allowed to do the development process and the strategic plan on how we wanted to go about implementing the event.

Still, also converse to the condition of basketball, the good political standing of youth lacrosse marketing within the organization has not yet cemented their legitimacy within the larger elite lacrosse market. What the opposing challenges of this corporation's basketball and lacrosse arms underscore is that regardless of the internal or external currency of their work, there no guarantees regarding their ability to compete externally and increase market share. Hence, they must actively adapt to their fields as a means of responding to continued uncertainty within the market.

### **Isomorphism**

In facing the uncertainty of a competitive market, it is important to have a sound strategic model. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) posit that within an institutional field, organizations (or individuals, for that matter) commonly employ isomorphism as an approach to developing a sustainable model. Isomorphism describes the process through which an organization or division may tailor its structures and/or principles in a way that conforms to those already legitimized within the institutional field. The elite youth athletic landscape presents a very compelling case of how such a theoretical process plays out in a real-world market context.

The accounts of the origins of the grassroots infrastructure relayed in the previous chapter—along with the description of the internal conflict as divisions compete with resources—are a testament to the prevalence of isomorphism in this field. Anyone who might be skeptical of the fundamental value of the grassroots marketing approach and curious about how it came to be such a widely implemented practice need look no further than the mantra, “everyone is doing it”. Sonny Vaccaro and his peers have managed to convince several corporations that the key to establishing a legitimate basketball brand is through youth events, which eventually lead to lucrative relationships with highly talented and marketable individuals. Even on the lacrosse side, adidas was late to the table in manufacturing and marketing lacrosse performance equipment, but as they sought to establish themselves in the field, they immediately set out to develop an elite event infrastructure similar to those already in place for competing corporations. Frankly, it is difficult for firms to carve out a distinct path within sports fields that has continued to operate in accordance with specific norms over time. In order to be taken seriously by top players, club colleges, college coaches, professional organizations, media outlets and the like, any company hoping to carry influence within this field must present a model that aligns well with everyone's expectations. This can even be the case for an organization already participating in the field, yet looking to change.

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Incidentally, even as adidas had already established a functional grassroots marketing model in the 1990s, Vaccaro's departure left a void that required the new division—led by DK—to conceive a new direction for the company's basketball endeavors. Vaccaro was shifting to a company that adidas was actually in the process of acquiring, and yet he would operate under a different structure that would actually compete with that of adidas. DK details how this organizational shift led him to revamp their structure in 2006:

We didn't really skip a beat. So at the time, the way to fight [Vaccaro], once we had those guys, was we looked at it like...we can do a camp, and [ours] can be better than theirs. We can do a tournament and get better teams. We can do an all-star game and get good kids. So we created like structures, and that was also key in the business, because, what happened was the business was based upon--he had this model at Nike, those three things and all the benefits--he started them all at adidas and it was gonna be a "pick-'em". You could only go to two games; of them one is gonna be the McDonald's game, and the Nike kids go to the Jordan game, and the adidas kids go to Sonny's game. The tournaments--there's a Nike tournament--he controlled all the adidas kids, and Nike controlled all the Nike kids. So once adidas was in the grassroots game, it was a divide and conquer situation...So I set up like structures, which actually helped Nike to a great degree, because it was like now adidas and Reebok are fighting, and Nike is going strong. Well it also hurt them in a sense, too, because we were going after their players. They had two people to fight against. All of us did. Now we come back to 2006, and we had a lot of--there was a big movement out there at the time. Grassroots basketball is a bad thing. These ABCD camps are all about--the game is going to shit, the US teams are losing, it's not fundamental, the AAU coaches are controlling all the shit, it's a bad thing. So I was getting a lot of pressure to see how could we do this different. I looked again at all the reasons why--the reasons why Sonny did all these things, there were positive things in this for the company, so let's look at what those positives were and how we could achieve these positive things for the company in other ways. The model I came up with was--how do I get to the players and establish these relationships. It's an elite thing, the same way camps did it, but do it in a different way. And that's when I came up with the system, adidas Nations.

Thus, even as he set out to change the paradigm under which adidas Basketball was operating, DK examined ways to create "like structures" and then improve upon them. In fact, the base model remained the same: develop relationships with the most gifted players and the most influential basketball actors through sponsorship of events. DK's explanation also highlights the underlying reality that they and their competitors all vie to connect with the same limited talent pool, which also faces limited choice in the avenues in which they can participate. That is to say that each organization seeks to establish legitimacy among the same single group of actors, which necessitates the employ of at least some familiar forms their potential clients/customers might recognize.

Frankly speaking, isomorphism represents a particularly cogent strategy for those factions operating at the margins. DK was aware of the fact that a new system would be compared with the successful model that his predecessor had established. CR points out that all such actors in the field are acutely aware that they are "chasing Nike". Accordingly, they cannot afford to have the public get the impression that their differences in approach are the product of their natural inferiority; hence they implement the most similar models possible. As adidas did not even sell lacrosse products until midway through the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, JB and his division started off in a marginal position of their own. Although they had the latitude to fine-tune their design in house, an integral part of their initial development process involved investigating how to leverage current models:

We tried to secure and research some of the preexisting companies that were doing events and camps, and partner with them to see if we could work together. What we brought to the table was insight from the adidas brands, which was helpful in growing their events, and the connections and networks with a lot of our teams and athletes. On the other hand, with corporations, pre-existing event groups, our hope was that they'd bring the experience from running events, and pre-existing with an already-existing event, or at least

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an infrastructure where we could work to develop an event, they could actually take on the responsibility of doing the day-to-day operations, of running the event, we could assist with marketing, and of course our brand resources.

This account suggests that aside from solidifying themselves as trustworthy, isomorphism provides opportunities to devote resources and energies to more focused development in the areas in which they are proficient. Moreover, beyond conforming to legitimized structures, JB elucidates another common strategy in adapting to demands and environmental change: the formation of coalitions and partnerships.

### **Coalitions and partnerships**

For all the resources and strategies adidas has worked to cultivate internally, one of the most impactful tactics an organization can employ in responding to technical and institutional demands is to leverage the strengths of external actors. As CR suggests in Chapter 3, the strategic plan of the apparel company is predicated on the formation of relationships across levels. LA adds, “You always have coaches and people who are part of your network who can identify the best of the best. And that's what we do, we put the most competitive event on the map that we can.” This points to the fact that, beyond actual content, the quality of an event is determined by the status of the individuals present, both as participants and as spectators. That is, the best events in these fields are attended by the most elite players as well as coaches from the most successful college programs. Moreover, the best-implemented marketing tactics result in the formation of prolonged relationships, either between consumer and product, or between brand and endorser. Incidentally, all who attend such events can potentially serve in one or both capacities. Accordingly, with so many individuals and organizations within the field vying for influence and limited resources, the apparel company must enact a model that allows them to solidify long-term associations with key actors over time.

This study's literature review cites a study by Washington (2004), who describes how the NCAA advanced its institutional change strategy in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century by aggressively altering and expanding its membership. The elite grassroots athletics paradigm has followed a similar path in that the major corporate actors have sought to stake out their territory by enticing different factions to sign on with them exclusively. Of course, this is what made Vaccaro such a commodity at the inception of this infrastructure; he promised to deliver exclusive relationships with can't-miss talents that—even if they could not enjoy iconic success proportional with that of Jordan—would afford each company significant brand development and revenue. Incidentally, particularly within the basketball world, actors generate power proportional to their ability to deliver people and/or resources. Included among this group are: club coaches, scouts, sports agents, college coaches, media representatives and marketing directors, among others. In illustrating the influential nature of the grassroots network, DK explains that in its initial model the company facilitated meetings that allowed them to vie for the loyalties of key actors, while simultaneously establishing a network of business relationships. The elite summer events would essentially convene different parties to strengthen their alignment with the brand, as well as discuss business arrangements with one another. Hence, each party had an incentive to maintain a loyal association with adidas, as they would be granted access to pipelines of talent, of representation, of equipment and—not least important—of money. This practice helped solidify the influence of adidas Basketball, but also

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created a potentially challenging dynamic for DK as Vaccaro left. He would need to reconstitute his own adidas membership to ensure that their events continued to incorporate all the entities necessary to be successful:

... I said, OK who are his main guys? And who can I get to be loyal to adidas first, before Sonny? It was guys like those guys, who were willing to go off on their own. Those guys had come to a meeting with Dan Fagan for their own meeting, and that's where it started where they didn't go through Sonny any longer, they all cut their own deals for more money. They didn't need Sonny as the middle guy. That's also, over the course of time, weakened his power. Because if you look now, I can go down to every AAU coach, they're all tied into agents. They're all basically free agents. So I ended up getting the guys that weren't necessarily loyal--I know that those guys weren't gonna be loyal to Sonny, because they turned on him and went with their own dudes, so there's a reason they think, "This guy is exploiting me", which was the case in my opinion. Those are the guys that I kept. So what I did, I went after those guys that I felt would not be controlled by him, and I said, "What we're gonna do is--I'm gonna create a board of directors. It's not about me, it's about we. We have the power, so you guys can deal with whatever agents you wanna deal with. You're the guys who are valuable, not him. Why are you making that motherfucker rich? What I want, I want what's best for this company. I wanna market the shit, I wanna sign guys, cuz I'm not getting kickbacks." So that's what we did and it worked.

DK's efforts to build a strategic coalition speak to the highly competitive nature of the field. In order to respond to this volatility, he had to devise a strategy that would simultaneously strengthen his institutional network while also differentiating adidas from the competition.

Of course, the model of coalition-building and exclusive business associations has not just been solely the function of adidas. In fact, much of the fierce competition that ensued between adidas and Nike was based on the fact that they would host their landmark events at the same time, thereby forcing players and coaches to choose events. DK elaborates:

So now the major thing is adidas Nations, which is a national team, and there's the tournament in Cincinnati and the tournament in Vegas, which are team events. We showcase our strong teams. The other thing is from a marketing standpoint, the marketing pitch over the last few years has been, "We, not me." Nike has been all about "me", and individualism. We're about team. That was the marketing pitch. So getting away from the camps and having these--during that July evaluation period, Cincinnati takes place at the same time as Nike Camp, it's now called the LeBron Camp. We designed specifically, when Nike's going camp and individual, when Reebok's going camp and individual, we go team, because that's what our brand is about, because we're about team. That's where "It Takes Five" [the name of the Cincinnati event and the adidas tagline] come from. So you see there's a method to all this.

The open evaluation period, combined with restrictions on the number of national all-star games in which an individual can participate has only intensified the mutual exclusivity within the basketball field. Even as RM describes a time period where some of the most ambitious travel clubs would book themselves for multiple simultaneous events in Las Vegas, sometimes forfeiting bracket spots, the competing schedules have essentially compelled elite teams to align with a particular company or organizer, even when they are not sponsored. Accordingly, this increased the incentive for adidas to build a cadre of "contracted" teams, which initially numbered up to 60. Contracted teams would get full equipment, travel, and room and board, and thus the firm could guarantee the attendance of all their most talented teams. However, this approach proved to lack fiscal sustainability, and hence RM reports that the firm now only features 12 fully contracted travel teams. Even without the contracted teams, lacrosse presents a similar dynamic. With numerous events taking place during the same weeks within a tight open period, participants effectively associate themselves with one organization or another. The ANLC took place at the same time as the Under Armour national event, and JB's partner deliberately scheduled it to start in the middle of the week, so that it would not interfere with club team practices and competitions. Again, the stability and quality of

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relationships prevail over all. So much so, in fact, that DK actually sought to reform the model in the post-Vaccaro era to create a more amenable atmosphere.

In overhauling the grassroots organizational structure in 2006, DK felt he had to re-think the way he would utilize cooperation and partnerships to advance the adidas mission. The fact of the matter was that they had been playing catch-up with Nike since the inception of their entire system. If it was not enough that they had missed out on signing a shoe deal with the most lucrative global sports icon of all time in Jordan, they had to watch possibly the most prolific star of the generation that followed him in Kobe Bryant defect to Nike, and then watched their rivals scoop up the heir apparent in LeBron James in the following decade without them even being able to afford to make a bid. Hence, continuing with the status quo was tantamount to fighting a losing battle; that is, if they could even get to the battlefield. For this reason DK and adidas orchestrated a paradigm shift by which they would go from being perpetually second-best in the endorsement arms race to being essentially altogether different, following with that “we, not me” philosophy referenced above:

The model I came up with was--how do I get to the players and establish these relationships. It's an elite thing, the same way camps did it, but do it in a different way. And that's when I came up with the system, adidas Nations. At the time, you really determined what kind of kid you were by the events you went to. The camp, the tournament, and the all-star game. What if you could determine what kind of kid you were based upon--like let's create a national team--I play for an adidas national team, like an AAU team, but with the 15-best in the class. So we created this. Also, there needs to be a change in philosophy. Nike is built on--we were built on--Sonny is built on divide and conquer. We don't let them see what's over there, we take `em, and show `em and control what they do. With adidas Nations my philosophy is this, because I wanna get the 15 best. If you look at the roster right now, there's a lot of Nike guys, because what we said is, I tell a parent we're trying to get the best, regardless of shoe affiliation. You can go to LeBron camp, you can play for the Nike team, you can do whatever you want, but I just want you to commit on these dates to come to our workouts. We're trying to make your kid a better player, you're gonna get NBA instruction, you're getting worked out by Athletic Performance Inc.. These are world-renowned guys who focus on performance training...it's a great thing. So I tell them, this is great for your kid, so do whatever you want. But Nike, who can't help themselves, because their philosophy is based upon divide and conquer, so they go to the parent and say, "those guys are bad guys", but I've already told the parent that this is coming, they don't want you to do our shit, but you can do their shit. So then now they're lookin at me like, "God you know what, [DK] and adidas, these guys are good guys, they're out for me." So it's worked

Whereas this particular excerpt references adidas Nations, the team mentality has been infused into the Super 64 and It Takes Five events, as well as their marketing and endorsement strategies. Shifting demands and uncertainty caused adidas Basketball to respond by seeking to strengthen its coalitions through a more collaborative approach.

It is striking that hardly anywhere in DK or CR's accounts of their efforts to advance their organizational strategies do they mention conventional technical aspects such as revenue, overhead cost, profit margin, or any of the other numerous concepts associated with for-profit entities. Their focus is overwhelmingly institutional, and while they do understand themselves to be working with limited resources, they do not refer to aspects pertaining to technical efficiency when discussing what they need in order to be able to achieve their goals. On the other hand, the lacrosse division has employed coalitions and partnerships as means towards addressing the technical aspects.

Originally, JB's marketing firm was a wrestling mail-order company; roughly 15 years ago adidas offered them the exclusive opportunity to license and distribute wrestling equipment and footwear for North America. In 2007, the firm approached JB after learning of the potential to get exclusive rights for licensing and distributing for adidas lacrosse and field

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hockey as well. He was a particularly valuable asset, as he came in with experience in event coordination and fundraising. After he came in, he was granted latitude in the strategic and vision areas, but adidas also pointed him in the direction of partners:

[adidas has] been very helpful in guiding us to, for instance, Gatorade, who's adidas's partner, and very helpful in supporting our lacrosse and wrestling events. But as far as development on how we brand the event and such, that was pretty much done on our own, with approval...so we were kind of allowed to do the development process and the strategic plan on how we wanted to go about implementing the event.

Accordingly, one significant strategy was to enlist the expertise of organizations that possessed greater capacity in the technical arena, particularly a small firm that could develop the online infrastructure as well as the recruitment profile development tools. What is evident from studying either sport is that cooperation and relationships operate as currency within these fields, which underlines the value of legitimacy and positive brand image. Of course, part of maintaining the appearance of legitimacy involves compliance with the regulatory body.

In order to certify their events as authorized recruiting events with the NCAA, the organizers in both sports take care to comply with the various regulatory demands set forth. Each event features a mandatory orientation on NCAA regulations, which each player and high school coach must attend prior to competing. Orientation at the basketball events takes the form of a 20-minute video on the challenges of being a student athlete, amateur athlete, and good citizen. Each participant must watch this presentation, whether he has already seen it recently or not, which means it would not be impossible for him to view it 10 times in a given year. Beyond the video, earlier chapters have already made mention of the various precautions organizers take—particularly in the basketball realm—to regulate the flow and contact of participants, club coaches, and college coaches. Among the most striking relevant images at the Super 64 event was the separate coaches entrance at a youth gym in Las Vegas that led to the court where a game was being played by rising 9<sup>th</sup> graders. The event coordinators had cordoned off an entire bleacher section for college coaches with caution tape, and yet not a single coach showed up to see that game. Just as it ended, an assistant coach from a major program did show up to see the following game, and naturally was at no loss for legroom. Nevertheless, with so many interests depending on the continuation of these elite recruiting showcases, organizers—at least on the basketball side—cannot afford to take many risks. Of course, with considerably less revenue at stake, the lacrosse division has more room for leniency, but they still must take compliance seriously. Incidentally, the apparel company does not represent the sole group of actors that feels that it is limited considerably by NCAA regulations.

### *College coaches*

For all of the power the college coaches possess in the youth system, they too have had to make some adjustments in the way they operate based on the myriad institutional requirements. In a previous era, when coaches had a wider window of time in which they could travel and see talented players up close at their own high schools, summers were largely devoted to attending and/or working at a few major camps, and then hosting productive camps of their own. Through the interaction of several factors, the recruiting landscape has transformed over time, hence college programs must find different ways to respond that will allow them to continue to compete. With the ever-intensifying summer events phenomenon, coaches have responded by being more strategic about how they allocate their time.

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### **Adaptation to elite youth infrastructure**

From the coach's perspective, with the expansion of the summer recruiting showcase as industry and few barriers to entry, he must determine where his time and energy would be best spent to maximize his productivity. Failing to identify any viable prospect at an event could have detrimental consequences. SJ goes into greater detail:

We've had to change our focus, and go, ok, there's a monster tournament out in such and such, and everybody seems to go there, but there are not a lot of Princeton kids there, so let's go to this smaller tournament over here, and be more productive with our time. That smaller tournament may have only come about in these last few years, where this monster tournament's been around 10-15, but it's not serving our purpose anymore, because there's so many tournaments, and so many kids playing. So we're at the point where we're on the brink of not being as productive as we need to be.

At what point it's too much is what I think is being talked about now by a lot of people who have more experience than me, who've been in the business of college coaching, and I think they're getting closer to—you know, they're having good conversations. I'm anxious to hear what comes of it.

SJ's concern illuminates the competing pressures and demands coaches face, particularly when they come from programs with more modest available resources. The open period combines with their budgets to limit the time and capacity to attend numerous events and identify prospective players. On the other hand, the big, well-established events may not offer up enough student athletes with the optimal combination of grade point average, talent, and willingness to attend a program that cannot offer an athletic scholarship. As a result, the coach must continue to work to not only be more efficient with his time and travel, but also fine-tune his approach to recruiting and enrolling athletes.

JT believes that while the motivations and behaviors of recruits have largely remained constant throughout this tenure as a coach, it is the approach that he and his contemporaries must take to the process that has changed: "Coaches have to determine their approach now. The students are the same as they've always been, but it's about how you recruit. You have to figure out who or what is important in the recruiting process—who's the influential person in kids' lives, because it's not necessarily clear right off the bat." This is in reference to the growing faction of adults that may be integral to a student's inner circle, particularly as their participation in various teams and organizations expands. It may be a parent, an interscholastic high school coach, a club coach, a mentor, or even someone associated with an external organization such as a shoe company. Moreover, much like the apparel company, as the system has become more complex, the college coach has to rely on allies to navigate it.

### **Coalitions and partnerships**

College coaches rely on their own partnerships as a means of navigating what can be a confusing and overwhelming recruiting process. As discussed in earlier chapters, coaches often work together, even as they operate in competition. Because the vast majority of coaches played basketball at the college (and in some cases, professional) level, they largely operate as a fraternity of sorts. Many of them played together, or against one another, or even worked together on other coaching staffs at some point in their careers. What results is a modicum of collegiality, where head coaches and assistant coaches from across the country greet each other as old friends at events, and engage in conversations with one another as they watch games throughout the day. Despite the assertion from the southern assistant coach that they

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are “talkin’, but ain’t sayin’ nothin’ to each other”, there were several instances where coaches lent other their coaches their roster books, provided additional information and advice on certain players, and even offered to put players and coaches in contact with one another. Hence, with greater uncertainty in the recruiting environment, coaches—even as they compete with another—rely on each other for guidance. Still, for all the competition among coaches, they must be aware of some of the greatest sources of instability, in the form of the university administration and the NCAA.

A significant contributor to the volatility of the college coaching vocation is the demands placed on them from their own administrations as well as the NCAA. Just as the basketball division at adidas has had to work to defend its position, so have coaches from discord with their higher-ups. According to KK, in order to avoid any perception of impropriety in recruiting or day-to-day operations, they work closely with their admissions and other administrative offices. Incidentally, these efforts accord with NCAA compliance. In either case, coaches are under significant scrutiny to ensure they neither violate any rules as they bring in new student athletes nor enroll students unprepared to do college work and at risk of smudging the reputation of their institution. This is particularly pertinent within the basketball field, for which the NCAA has provided its own set of regulations. Nevertheless, coaches do not merely adapt to dynamic structures and regulations, they also respond to external pressures by carving out their own demands.

### Shaping demands

As they encounter certain pressures to retain their positions by enjoying competitive success while operating in accordance with the larger institutional mission, coaches at the university level in some ways pass those pressures on to other parties in the field in the form of institutional demands that they themselves shape. Despite the fact that the expansion of the summer youth sports industry has generated more interest from consumers on its own, college coaches also play a part in increasing that demand. SJ explains that coaches from prominent academic institutions such as those in the Ivy League have a certain type of player they look for to fit the requirements of their field. The first aspect is academic achievement, which is followed by demonstrated talent on an elite level and commitment to improvement in their sport:

*SJ:* And so it's balanced. That doesn't mean they're all Rhodes Scholars, on one end, and it doesn't mean that they're all NBA-caliber players either. They want to be very very good at basketball, but once they walk off the court, that doesn't mean they're trying to figure out, "How do I blow off this paper", no they think, "OK, I'm done with hoops today, how am I gonna get an outline together...how am I gonna attack this paper?" So the guys that we get that are interested in us, you know, they probably have as good of a balance or feel that athletics can't be the sole purpose for them being there. It wouldn't make sense for them to come to Princeton if it were. There's too good of an education they can get here, for that to be the case.

*Interviewer:* What proportion of your U.S.-born players played travel or club ball before coming to play for you?

*SJ:* I would say all of them, and you know, with some of the imperfections of youth basketball being out there, that being said, we strongly encourage the guys we care about--prospects, recruits--we want them to play summer ball. That doesn't mean we're not gonna recruit you if you're not playing, you know, we want to see some caring that this is something that you do on a regular basis, we want you to compete at the



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highest level that you can, and often that comes during the summer. So, I would say every kid on our roster has played summer ball for several seasons during their high school time.

What SJ describes is the way in which coaches can define the terms of legitimacy for potential participants in their program. GA speaks to a similar dynamic in the lacrosse realm: "...and the best camps I've attended, the best recruiting events I've attended, college coaches have been completely clear about what they're looking for, which is: if it's Hartford College, maybe the 2.5 is OK. If it's Harvard, you need to be in the top ten percent of students applying, period." Of course there is no policy that requires participation in the elite summer system as a condition for recruitment, but knowing that they are competing with countless other athletes in a market-based environment, few college hopefuls would likely want to risk placing themselves at a perceived disadvantage by abstaining. As the coaches shape this demand, they benefit in that they can strongly encourage prospects to show up at the events where they will be recruiting, and also that by the time their recruits do enroll, they will have played considerably more games against better competition, which should increase their aptitude at the college level.

One other such example of influencing legitimacy at the college level appears as KK describes how his program and others have begun asking recruits to commit and even enroll earlier (either in the summer, or even in the spring) before the standard enrollment date. According to him, this allows students to get a head start on the academic classes and helps staff identify any supplemental needs early on in the process. Of course, it does not hurt that earlier commitment also grants coaches the opportunity to refine their new players' basketball skills and get them acclimated to their systems. In this way they are able to transfer some of their occupational pressures to the students to whom they appeal. Nevertheless, coaches at the intercollegiate level are not the only ones who develop measures by which to navigate intense institutional pressures. Their counterparts at the high school club level also develop responses as a means toward survival.

### *Club coaches*

If there were an analytical mechanism by which one could measure the degree of pressure felt by each type of actor within the youth sports field, controlling for revenue at stake and national media exposure, it is possible that club coaches would score the highest. The youth participants face a litany of requirements on their time, energy, and pocketbooks, but they can anticipate that it will all settle down by the latter half of their senior year in high school. The apparel company certainly deals with significant multi-million dollar cost and revenue figures and they must please several different constituencies at once, but they have the benefit of organizational and resource stability, and there is not much change on a daily basis that puts them in jeopardy. College coaches face the challenge of preparing their teams to compete and win games on a daily basis, as well as high visibility and the reality of turnover due to graduation, transfer, or attrition, but they also can rest on relatively strong stability in resources, legitimacy, schedule and status. Club coaches face a litany of demands that are comparable to other actors: participation in multiple summer events; significant player turnover; maintenance of positive working relationships with multiple groups at once; and fundraising. The primary difference is that the instability of this sector is such that many

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elements could change on a given day. As a result, they have to be aggressive in their response to these pressures.

### **Isomorphism**

Of course, one of the primary functions of the club coach is to fundraise. As discussed in earlier chapters, with few consistent long-term sources of income travel programs seek out sponsorships (from businesses large and small), sell raffle tickets, solicit donations, and even host their own events in order to raise funds. Aside from their work to generate resources, much like the apparel company clubs often make use of isomorphism and coalitions in order to survive. Because of the variation in conditions among them, programs identify successful models to emulate. Incidentally, both CF and RY, whose teams compete in the same area and have enjoyed ongoing success, both mention the other as the program whose model is closest to theirs. Moreover, both indicate that they have borrowed ideas from the other, as they have both been in operation for roughly two decades. RY explains:

I think [RY's Team] and [CF's Team] have been around the longest in this area, no doubt about it. And the Soldiers used to just do high school, and we always did from younger all the way through high school. And then they started doing the younger guys, like 7th and 8th graders, which was good because it made it a competitive nature between them and us when we play each other. They always have good coaching and some of the better kids in the area, the same as us.

CF concurs with this account, as he distinguishes between club “teams” and club “programs”, the latter of which provides support outside the athletic realm, in the form of academic support, counseling and mentorship. He believes that as other organizations in the Bay Area look to have similar success, they are beginning to conform to more of the program model:

In complete mission, the only program that I really have always felt that we were really similar to in terms of providing the mentorship, the guidance and counseling, the basketball experience, the visibility opportunity, and the development of the adults that are working with them, I've always thought of the [RY's organization]. Now there are teams...Well there's one other group that is now trying to evolve into a program that is more scaled, and that would be the Bay Area Hoosiers. There's also the Bay Area Ballers, who've been around for about 18 years. And they're on the peninsula...then there's the Bay Area Warriors...there is the Lake Show/MVP program. I put all those programs in the same group. I put [RY's organization] one level above, because they've done it for 20 years—21 years—and they've always had a huge part in the mentorship piece. I think that's something that in some cases, people do the basketball, but the mentorship really isn't there. And there's equivalent programs to all of ours on the girls side. And there's just tons of teams that are all around, some that are beginning to evolve into more of programs, where they're doing events, activities, more into counseling of their kids, that sort of thing.

As these clubs seek to keep pace with one another and attract the best talent, it follows that they would adapt their structures to offer more comprehensive services to youth participants. CF's description also calls to mind DK's impactful description of the instances in which club coaches may utilize their own funds to fully outfit their teams so as to appear that they are sponsored. It provides another illustration of how, in an effort to improve and stabilize its status within the field, club organizations may employ isomorphic strategy to alter its behavior to reflect that of another well-established peer entity. Incidentally, though these examples appear to place greater strain on the coaches, the youth participants appear to be the beneficiaries of better educational services and new, stylish equipment at little or no cost. Still, as much as they may attempt to emulate stable organizations within the institutional field, club coaches also respond to growing uncertainty through cooperation.

### **Coalitions and partnerships**

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Coaches from various programs in the same area work with one another in local networks to share information, form events, and even merge to expand their scope. At the end of the day, there is a finite number of spots on each team, and thus different teams may coordinate with one another to help identify talented players and find them teams. Certain clubs may coordinate with other athletic organizations to put on events or expand their services. CF counts the YMCA, Police Athletic League, and Boys and Girls Club among his organization's partners. TK explains that in a growing sport with a more intimate network such as lacrosse, coaches often seek out other coaches to get advice as to how they can build up a successful program where one might not have existed before. Moreover, they coordinate with one another in order to arrange competitions during the interscholastic off-season. For those organizations looking to expand in scope, they may choose to arrange a merger, as RY's club did. Their newly formed organization allowed them to join players from an expanded geographical area surrounding the Bay Area. Moreover, they were able to pool resources to establish a team in a nearby geographical area where they previously had no presence. Hence, in this relatively unstable environment, collaboration may offer club organizations a better chance at survival over time. Still, club coaches are able to influence the field in their own ways.

### **Shaping demands**

It is ultimately a select and fortunate few club directors who are in the position to assert their demands on apparel companies and college coaches. Those well-established programs with an extended history of producing elite talent excels at the college and professional levels are afforded sponsorship opportunities, and can thus make requests of those other actors that their peers might not. Nevertheless, one fundamental way through which they can generally shape the demands of the field is by expanding their outreach to groups that might not typically participate. That is, in order to field a more competitive team, they attempt to deepen the pool of available talent by expanding access for groups whose participation might be lower. More remarkable than the fact that this phenomenon is a component of both basketball and lacrosse is the fact that the coaches discuss reaching out to almost exact opposite demographic groups. With lacrosse traditionally being a sport for the privileged, GA describes efforts to expand the demographics of the game in California and other places:

[Lacrosse] has always been a middle-upper class, white sport. It has. Is the barrier breaking down a little in California? It is. There are definitely more--there are some inner-city clubs at the public schools that are more integrated than the private schools, and there are some more Asian American or Afro American lacrosse players that are out there. ..A lot of kids play sport to be able to get the opportunity to play in college, right? If you were to look at the demographics of the final four teams to play in college lacrosse this year, I don't know if you saw any minorities on the roster. Maybe out of a 40-man roster at Cornell, two guys were African American, maybe. Unfortunately the perception is still the reality in that it tends to be an upper-middle white sport. Why? The equipment costs a lot of money. The camps cost a lot of money. You can't go out and play pick-up lacrosse on a court in the middle of a city. You need a field with lines, you need pads and you need a stick. So it's priced out of the most urban areas. There are some incredible organizations out there trying to bring lacrosse to urban areas....But unfortunately I'd have to say the perception of lacrosse since I started playing it and my dad was coaching it is still the reality, which is you can count the number of minorities on each team with one hand.

At the Bay Area tryout for the ANLC, a handful of participants showed up from Lacrosse for Life, a program designed to expose inner-city youth in San Francisco to lacrosse, starting in grade school. In fact, these participants accounted for the majority of players of color present at the

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event that day. Thus, there is evidence that efforts to diversify the game locally with low-income students and people of color may be gradually having an impact. On the other hand, CF asserts that his organization has increased its engagement with a somewhat atypical demographic by serving more youth from more privileged backgrounds:

Over the 20-year history of the program, there's been an evolution. Originally it started out being a heavy profile on kids from the inner-city, who grew up in Richmond, because the two founders were both from Richmond, and grew up on the Flatlands. Over the ten years that they really ran the program, that started opening up, because what you have happen is there are kids that have great need and no resources, and there are kids with, not necessarily need, but they have great desire, and they have resources. Those are the kids whose parents are working class, middle class, upper-middle. and lower-upper class. The kids who have need, needless to say, are generally inner-city, kids from the barrios, kids who are Flatlanders, where their parents might be lower working class, kids that come from single-parent households primarily dominated by women. In those cases, they have great need, hopefully they have great desire to go to college, to try to make their life better. And so we reach out to those kids.

Essentially CF describes almost a reverse stratification in which those from underprivileged backgrounds have traditionally been the most successful basketball players, and thus this shift over the past ten years has also worked to deepen its talent pool with white players and those from more well-off backgrounds. Nevertheless, there is still an apparent commitment to serving marginalized populations with the greatest needs. In either case, coaches are aware of stratification within their sports and the overarching needs of underrepresented communities in society, while also increasing awareness and demand among minorities within the sport.

This chapter and the one preceding it demonstrate the precedence of legitimacy in the youth sports field. As such, the requirements to sustain such legitimacy are dynamic and unstable, which prompts the core actors within the field to work continuously to formulate an adequate response. That response could come either in the form of an adaptation to demands, such that an actor conforms its behaviors to the apparent requirements, or they may assert their own demands to shape the field. That is, they may leverage their own position to apply pressure to other factions. The viability of this balanced response is likely due to the market-based nature of the field, and more particularly the fact that each actor simultaneously acts as a buyer and a seller of services. Although each is exposed to consistent instances of vulnerability, each has the capacity to leverage their position against other actors who may be pursuing them. There is certainly significant differentiation in available financial resources—adidas deals with millions of dollars while some youth participants may not pay for any services at all—and yet there is no group that is the sole dominant actor, nor is there a group is altogether subjugated.

One significant and somewhat unconventional finding from this chapter is the fact that even youth participants and their families come to ask more of the organizations in which they participate over time, and the most gifted can expect rewards in the form of preferred admission, scholarships, material inducements, or even a professional salary. It is true that the capitalistic nature of this environment gives way to inherent inequalities for individuals in disadvantaged positions, and yet no group is fundamentally without influence. Given the assumptions discussed in earlier chapters pertaining to the aims and influence of corporations, it is paramount to understand that this field cannot function with only one party making the rules. Even though greater capital may afford individuals and organizations a louder voice at times, families, coaches, and other relevant actors are not always beholden to big businesses.

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This is especially true when the gamut of actors involved actively pursues avenues to leverage their position in a market-based system for their own gain. Whether it be players and their talents, college coaches and their admissions spots, or apparel companies and their material inducement, these actors all exploit the commodities they possess to apply pressure to those who possess the commodities they desire.

## Chapter 7—Discussion

The last four chapters analyze in detail a set of clearly commercialized youth athletic fields as a case study of how market influences play out in an institutional field primarily serving school-age youth. This discussion chapter accomplishes four major tasks. First, it presents the major findings and themes demonstrating the market-based nature of youth sports, with particular attention to opportunities for profit. Next, it synthesizes the evidence compiled in response to the study's four core research questions in order to illustrate and discuss the implications of the present organization of extracurricular youth life. Additionally, it relies on the aforementioned illustration to discuss the implications of such organization and commercialization in the educational realm. Finally, this chapter highlights the ways in which this study advances understanding the institutional interplay between families and firms/consumers and suppliers/low-capital and high-capital entities. To these ends, it is first necessary to review some of the fundamental aspects of the grassroots youth sports scene as a commercial, marketing phenomenon.

The comprehensiveness and prominence of the adidas events underscore the positioning of corporations and other for-profit organizations in this contemporary landscape. It is worth mentioning that public-sector and non-profit fields are also commonly marked by economically motivated interests or relationships. Public employees still seek competitive salaries and incentives for jobs well done; non-profits accept bids from profit-based entities to provide goods and services; and government systems operate with considerable budgets, which call for aptitude in efficiency and management. Yet, it is the combination of the breadth and the cohesiveness of the actors within the field that constitute its categorization as an enterprise. Each sport's institutional field convenes various self-interested parties in loosely regulated, neo-liberal market venues, where the actors can exchange goods and services, within certain limits. Moreover, many of these venues are coordinated by multi-national apparel corporations, which not only seek to increase revenue, but also develop long-term marketing relationships with their consumers and partners through various means. Accordingly, there are a number of additional aspects that distinguish the youth grassroots sports field as highly commercialized.

One of the most pervasive market indicators present in the field is the commercial terminology. At each level, the stakeholders largely speak about themselves and others as sellers and consumers. For example, each level actor indicates its hope to "sell" something to someone else. Youth participants sell their skill sets and backgrounds to college coaches; apparel companies sell their products and their brand image to consumers at all levels; college coaches seek to sell their programs to promising players with suitable academic performance backgrounds; and club coaches sell the prominence of their programs, as well as their ability to foster elite talent that will thrive at the college level. Still, each of them takes occasion to flex their "buying" power as well. This is particularly true in considering the decisions around which events certain individuals or factions attend. In a relatively open market landscape, people—players and coaches alike—have the benefit of choice in determining where they will display or view talent. Even as the cost of attending such events remains considerable, there is still substantial competition for the patronage of the most prominent and or well/resourced entities. Incidentally, one way in which these corporate apparel firms proceed to compete with one another is by increasing the volume and breadth of retail sales on site.

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The adidas summer recruiting showcase scene is marked by a deliberate attempt to connect the athletic experience to retail. Participants and spectators alike not only have the opportunity to purchase merchandise commemorating the events, but also general performance products related to the respective sports. The latest adidas performance shoe and shorts designs on the basketball side and cleats, jerseys, and sticks on the lacrosse side are available for display and consumption, in some cases at promotional prices. On top of their own gear, the apparel company has worked with partners to operate vendor stands for things ranging from protective mouthguards, to online technical assistance, to food. Hence, these elite youth events are commercial undertakings in nearly every aspect. Moreover, the sophisticated mix of retailers underscores the preeminence of profit in this particular field.

The purpose of demonstrating the widespread capitalism inherent within this particular sports field is to lay the groundwork for investigating the research questions this study outlines, both for the purposes of better understanding the immediate fields as well as the parallel educational sector. Although there is a certain set of expected behaviors that might be associated with for-profit business entities, the institutional elements within these athletic fields complicate their function. While the world of public education may not align perfectly with the youth sports case, the aforementioned point regarding institutional behavior highlights the complexities that accompany privatized services. This is particularly true when considering services for youth, for whom there are typically various protections in place, but who also represent a potential consumer base to which relevant firms seek to market aggressively. The following sections review the research questions engaged by this project, and discuss the implications for privatization in education.

### **Who are the key actors in the field?**

In examining youth sports as a free market structure, it is apparent that participation in this field occurs with relatively few limitations. That is, anyone with the physical ability, capital, or network can assert their own competitive athletic or fiscal goals through participation in some form or another. Of course, the presence of the young athletes is a given; they provide the basis for the functioning of the infrastructure in the first place. There can be various inequalities and impediments to involvement, but athletics is an area in which demonstrated merit can be a gateway toward participation. What is more remarkable is the access granted to adults. Essentially, any adult with the appropriate resources, contacts or idea can promote his or her own services, even where they do not seem appropriate or are not solicited. For example, one would typically not expect a custom mouthguard vendor to appear at a typical weekend tournament; nor is on-site video profile and recruiting consulting services one of the first features of a tournament that people inside or outside of the field list as integral. Still, the individuals involved in such businesses are afforded the opportunity to market their products and services in these landscapes in which young participants are already aggressively targeted for marketing, and are under significant pressure to perform. This is not to imply that many of these products and services are not useful in supporting young college hopefuls in reaching their goals, but rather it is remarkable that there almost appear to be endless possibilities for individuals and organizations to generate revenue in these fields. Nevertheless, for all the talk of free-market commercialism, the bulk of those actors operate on the fringe of these

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environments. The key actor groups discussed in this study represent the individuals who possess enough leverage to qualify them as fundamental to these institutions.

The most influential individuals in the field possess capital that they are able to infuse into the system. Incidentally, the most common and transferrable capital does not come in the financial form. Rather, human capital takes precedence in this landscape over all else. To be clear, the human capital is almost invariably tied to financial capital or some form of exchangeable currency. Still, power and survival in this landscape are derived from the capacity to deliver the most prolific individuals with the most frequency. More particularly, the best players and the best college coaches reign supreme as commodities in the market. Hence, even the most competitive product vendors at showcase events hold less prominence, as they provide a limited scope of benefits. With this dynamic in mind, it is then possible to begin imagining potential corollaries with actors within the schooling sector.

Although it might be limiting to discuss only a few forms of privatization in public schooling, certain initiatives have become more common and prominent in policy discussions. As mentioned earlier in this project, choice mechanisms such as voucher programs and charter schools, as well as private or for-profit management constitute privatized educational alternatives. In any case, much like in sports, educational fields feature shared core actors across the public and private sector. Of course, at the heart of it all are the students, who set and pursue goals, which commonly pertain to achievement of higher education. Teachers and administrators such as school principals help guide these students in learning and realizing their aspirations. Students seeking admission to selective colleges must interact with admissions directors and counselors, who seek to fill their classes each year with talented and promising individuals. There are certainly a litany of different educational aspirations and types of individuals involved in the schooling process, and hence a characterization of mobility towards higher education by no means captures all educational pathways. Rather, it merely provides an alternative pathway to juxtapose with the athletic case and imagine how market influences manifest in the schooling environment. In any case, these general actors are commonly found in and around most educational fields, be they public or private. Much like in the athletic sector, what is dynamic is the organizational structure, the governance system and the manner in which resources move around. Moreover, the public-private distinction largely has bearing on the degree of regulation within the field (typically with more regulation of the former than the latter). Hence, beyond the change in particular market-influenced initiative, the mix of core actors remains relatively stable.

Chapter 3 discusses the key actors in these elite youth athletic institutional fields and demonstrates how a range of stakeholders can constitute the foundation of a field, even with varying resources at hand. Students/families, high school coaches, college coaches, apparel companies, and even the NCAA as a regulating body possess a vast range of material resources, political influence, and notoriety. Nevertheless, as prominent of a presence as a major corporation such as Gatorade might have at an event, the firm's representatives garner far less attention on aggregate than do student athletes and their families of even modest means. This finding points to the importance of considering the various forms of capital that different entities possess that grant them an active presence in a commercial atmosphere. Moreover, in an educational field, this suggests that it is not accurate to assume that for-profit entities will naturally overwhelm the field and place entities with less financial resources at the margins.



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This is not to downplay the marginalization of the disadvantaged within the educational system, but rather to underscore that the evidence does not suggest that business interests place those people at the fringe any more than do public and non-profit systems in place. In the end, each actor type has its own motivations for participating in the institutions, centered on the participation of youth.

### **What are the central motivations of these core actors (families, private firms and public institutions) pertaining to participation within the field?**

The motivations chapter ultimately challenges the notion that profit interests outweigh civic and societal interests in a market-based educational field. That is, the technical demands of revenue maximization on their own do not preside over the institutional field. Specifically, the actors within the field—including those corporate entities do not merely behave in accordance with expectations and aspirations to maximize profit. Rather, individuals base their goals and behaviors based on institutionalized norms, as well as philanthropic or altruistic inspiration. Further, it is remarkable the degree to which the parents interviewed speak in clear market terms when discussing their sons' involvement in this private athletic system.

Contrary to literature depicting black families as disproportionately obsessed with sports and misguided dreams of professional careers and shoe contracts, heavy involvement in youth athletics is a manifestation of access to resources. Hence, the NCYS data cited in earlier chapters show that not only does participation in athletics increase with family socio-economic status, but also that white families participate at higher rates than any other racial group (of course males are more active than females in any group). Additionally, the comparative analysis of basketball and lacrosse in this study suggests that while the demographic bases of the two constituencies may diverge significantly, they have similar motivations. Incidentally, one of the prime potential methodological challenges of this study also represents one of its strongest evidentiary supports.

While the various events from this study featured youth from a broad range of backgrounds, it would also follow that the majority of parents available for interview were the ones who could afford it. Naturally, the costs associated with flying cross-country and securing room and board in unfamiliar cities for even one parent can add up into the thousands, let alone if the entire family hopes to make the trip to an elite tournament. Hence, it is not surprising that the parents interviewed described themselves as middle-class and raising their child with the help of another parent (almost invariably their current spouse). Of course, in the lacrosse world, this did not come off as particularly extraordinary, as less than 3 percent of the players listed in the official ANLC media guide had only one parent's name listed with them. Incidentally the guides provided at the basketball venues did not list parent names. Still, as a sport commonly associated with images of low-income black males from single-parent households, it is somewhat remarkable that those interviewed came from intact two-parent middle-class households, regardless of race. In any case, this potential methodological tripping point is actually a significant finding.

Without claiming to quantify the backgrounds or goals of all participants present at all the events, this study challenges conventional wisdom pertaining to intensity in motivation and participation around youth athletics. It cannot be ignored that even in an overwhelmingly socio-economically well-off field such as lacrosse, the parents articulate very clearly how they

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hope to utilize athletics to further their children's life goals. That basketball parents echo these goals only strengthens the argument that families with the greatest resources seek to take advantage of opportunity structures that they can actively navigate in order to increase their children's access to higher education. Moreover, none of those families refers to devaluing educational values or academic achievement, nor does any parent describe academic performance as mutually exclusive from intense athletic involvement. These families are neither fundamentally irrational nor lacking in values. Rather, they struggle to navigate a system that grants privileges and access based on certain forms of capital (largely that which is physical), and that capital is most commonly accessible to those who already possess substantial resources. A great deal of what invokes such common images of lower-class prominence in the sports realm is the underlying possibility (though rare) that a substantial enough sum of physical capital can supersede a shortage of financial resources.

Ultimately, this characterization of elite youth athletics as a middle-class neoliberal mechanism contradicts stereotypical notions surrounding families who devote seemingly inordinate time, energy, and resources to high-level sports participation. Further, it highlights the capacity of the market context to enable families to assert their various preferences and goals in mobilizing their children through a competitive educational landscape. Despite the fact that many of these goals are informed by larger institutional demands legitimized within the field, families still have opportunities to engage as proactive stakeholders. They are not merely objects of the economic interests of unfeeling companies. In fact, the companies in these fields are driven by pursuit of profit but their goals and behaviors transcend essentialized concepts of efficiency, cost reduction, and disregard for human relationships.

Of the adult participants within the field, no one is exclusively preoccupied with maximizing revenue. In fact, at the corporate level some do not explicitly articulate how their operational strategies actually function to increase profit over time. They are more concerned with improving the image of the brand and developing beneficial partnerships. Accordingly, coaches at the high school and college levels must be concerned with more than winning tactics alone, particularly as winning may be tied to other inputs such as recruiting and revenue. This serves as an indication of the fact that each actor alternates between pursuing goals of revenue maximization, legitimacy, and development of social relationships. Still, in these institutional fields characterized by a litany of motivations, it is apparent that survival largely hinges on the acquisition of revenue, or at least access to capital.

In sum, the various actors in the field are motivated by the need to compete at various levels. Hence, while their long-term goals may be clear and largely technical in nature (i.e. generating revenue and accessing college), actors also depend on the realization of more institutional short-term goals in order to survive. What is worth noting is that few of these goals appear to be inherently at odds with those of any other type of actor. As they all cooperate as part of a larger institutional field, each actor must support the overall strength of the broader infrastructure as well as appear legitimate in serving their particular purpose. Thus, whether it be parents, coaches, or marketing executives, none of them describes their goals in exclusively self-serving terms. Each makes an effort to get along in the system, so as to secure the support of the others. In considering the pertinence of these motivations to the educational sector, even in a market context, there is an assortment of forces that compel core actors to prioritize multiple goals at once, which may at times contradict one another. Families

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describe themselves as behaving opportunistically in a structure that allows them to advance their hopes for their children, both within the athletic arena as well as in life in general. Still, they make decisions that cost them considerable resources and in many ways limit their options over time. This finding speaks to the complexity of the demands faced by those participating in the field.

### **What technical-efficiency and institutional-normative demands do these core actors face as they vie for influence in the field, and where do they come from?**

Chapter 5 examines the myriad demands placed on the different actors as a result of participating in these fields. Incidentally, it offers up perhaps the most salient lessons for contemplating the implications of privatization in the public educational sector. Those who oppose the infusion of private elements into typically-public youth fields often cite concern that profit-driven technical demands will take priority over the intensely varied needs of children. While this is an important and valid concern, in such a field it is unrealistic to anticipate that any actor will only be driven by one set of motivations.

What the legitimacy concept underscores is the fact that production may not always take precedence over process. Technical demands pertain to the inputs necessary to sustain or improve the production of associated outputs. Institutional demands describe the requirements that qualify an entity to be able to produce outputs in the first place. It is a misconception that for-profit firms concern themselves exclusively with technical demands rooted in an unfeeling disregard for anything or anyone that does not enhance their bottom line. Regardless of whether or not an entity is run with the most noble of societal intentions, it must satisfy demands for legitimacy, as determined by constituents within the field. Of course, if the field is unfeeling and ill-intentioned, the organization will likely follow suit. Nevertheless, in a youth field such as sports or schooling, the myriad actors who comprise it can assert legitimacy demands that support the children's benefit, even as organizations pursue technical outputs. In fact, this dynamic does not just apply to organizations; it also applies to individual families.

The elite youth athletic infrastructure represents a compelling example of how pressing institutional demands manifest in the lives of families aspiring toward college recruitment. If families believed that pursuing opportunities to participate in interscholastic athletics were primarily a technical venture, they could focus their energies on merely improving the athlete's skill set through whatever mechanisms. That is, a technical orientation would afford student athletes the latitude to practice on their own, on the playground, or in any small venues with unsanctioned events, provided they improved their abilities—or their output—over time. However, the families in this study share that participation on club teams and in showcase events is part and parcel of the expectations set for student athletes hoping to have college coaches notice them. These people opt to follow a pathway they believe will ensure their legitimacy as elite participants and qualify them to be evaluated seriously. Whether or not it is actually possible for youth participants to prosper at the collegiate level without these intense high school experiences, the reality is that college basketball coaches in this project report that their teams are comprised almost exclusively of players who have had them. A couple coaches even go so far as to say that participation in such a format demonstrates an individual player's commitment to improving by competing against a high level of talent. Of course, families in the lacrosse realm share a similar belief about the importance of participating in showcase camps

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and tournaments. In the end, players and their parents invest in this commercial infrastructure in large part to signal their commitment to the recruitment process. Still, organizations work to signal their legitimacy within the field in a similar manner.

The organizations in these sports fields make deep investments in their legitimacy, even when it appears to be inefficient or costly at times. More importantly, these investments in many ways directly benefit the youth involved. One compelling example of how the appearance of legitimacy can benefit the student athletes, even in a clearly inefficient form is the club organization practice of fundraising and purchasing apparel from the adidas brand. DK asserts that some of the travel teams they outfit through discounted group rates pass on the apparel and equipment to their players for free, thereby giving the impression that they are sponsored (which boosts their status in the field and attracts more talented players). This fascinating culmination of organizational pressures works to the material advantage of those athletes who make those teams, as they enjoy high-quality and fashionable athletic gear at no cost to themselves and without having to fundraise. Regardless of the nobility of the club coaches' intentions, the push to appear capable and compete with peer organizations actually leads them to enhance the services they offer to youth participants. Moreover, it offers an intriguing case of how a youth organization operating in a market context might prioritize student needs as a means of competing. If the field is truly competitive and families are able to articulate their demands, the organization will constantly look to adapt to those demands in order to survive. That said,, if there is not legitimate competition, or if families are not able to understand or convey their best interests, the environment becomes more conducive to prioritizing revenue maximization.

In any case, the most important lesson from the section on the prevalence and origin of technical versus institutional demands is that organizational pressures are tied to the landscape of the field. Specifically, the institutional demands as determined by the various actors in the field generate greater instability with regards to how individual entities prioritize their goals. Moreover, the data suggest that the technical demands generally pertain to the underlying long-term goals while the institutional often correspond to more short-term processes. Hence, a market context on its own cannot predict organizational behavior detrimental to the students. Irrespective of how or why various demands manifest in a particular field, the actors within it must adopt mechanisms to respond to them.

### **How do these core actors respond to these technical-efficiency and institutional-normative demands in this field?**

However technical and institutional demands manifest in the field, they are often dynamic (particularly the institutional ones) and introduce uncertainty, which accordingly compels the relevant actors to respond. Chapter 6 of this study essentially finds that responses in these youth athletic fields essentially break down into two categories: adaptation to demands or the assertion of new ones to shape the field. Through the former strategy, actors assess the requirements for them to thrive and survive in the field and then align their behaviors accordingly. Through the latter, actors seek to mitigate some of the pressures they encounter by developing certain expectations within the field that will help them operate more smoothly.

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For example, in the lacrosse institutional field parents discuss how they must acquiesce to the expectation that their sons will participate in special summer events and eventually compile attractive recruiting profiles that they can use to market themselves. As a result, families conclude that if they must spend resources on these events and services they will be more discriminating in their patronage, based on cost and services offered. Hence, event organizers such as those at adidas must expand their services and offer premiums such as professional recruitment advising workshops and greater time allotments within which coaches can evaluate players. Of course, such a dynamic occurs at each level. College coaches simultaneously adapt to and shape demands when they attend in multiple showcase events in a short period of time, thereby increasing the pressure on other actors to keep the most prominent coaches at their events for as long as possible before they move on to others.

Ultimately, the evidence from this study suggests that in such institutional fields key actor groups have the opportunity to impact the landscape of the field by asserting their demands. In a market context, these groups balance simultaneous roles as buyers and sellers of services. Thus, even as they attempt to negotiate the demands placed on them as consumers, they still possess desirable assets within the field that they can leverage for their benefit. Accordingly, in a privatized schooling context families may have to keep pace with the expectations of a more competitive environment, but they also have the capacity to submit their own expectations. In a competitive field, if their needs are not met, they can take their patronage elsewhere. Additionally, there are important findings that arise outside of the analyses of the fundamental empirical questions. The following paragraphs review key conclusions from the study that could also have implications for the educational questions.

### *Opportunities*

What the youth basketball and lacrosse cases demonstrate is that the private sector offers very attractive potential perks and benefits for those who are able to access the field. Perhaps one of the most understated elements of this segment of youth life is the sheer material enticement. Starting with the most prominent, college athletic departments offer more interscholastic sports than ever before, thereby creating more opportunities for preferential admission and scholarships. As admissions processes remain highly competitive and tuition strains pocketbooks, these benefits appeal to families from all backgrounds. Nevertheless, college access is not the only benefit. If nothing else, the private elite sports structure offers a certain element of glamour, even to paying participants. On their own, they offer young athletes unique opportunities to play in national tournaments at Division I college arenas and plush athletic fields, in exciting locations such as Las Vegas and the Washington, D.C. metro area. On top of that, there are a host of exciting features associated with these experiences such as print, video and digital media outlets, professional photographers, and high-profile college coaches there to view them throughout each day. Finally, they get to wear sharp uniforms and equipment (sometimes for free) and interact with youth from a broad range of locales. This is not to mention the fact that in sports such as basketball some youth participants are able to experience all of this at no cost to themselves. These features show the depth of opportunities that arise in a market context.

As the various organizations within these fields attempt to compete, they continue to identify various services they can offer in order to distinguish themselves from the rest.

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Perhaps more significant, though, is the fact that families perceive the fields as components of opportunity structures available for them to actively navigate, based on their preferences and means. That is to say that students and parents do not merely have to accept the opportunities apparently available to them as standard issue; they can increase the amount of inputs they apply toward reaching their goal. In return, they gain greater access to resources and experiences than they would typically be afforded through standard public channels. These parents of varying backgrounds are willing to dedicate more resources and energy to opportunities that set their children apart from the general population (of course any available subsidies are welcome) and deepen their capacity to compete. The irony is that the various key actors in these athletic fields have noted that such a market approach has become so commonplace that it has essentially become an expectation of any student athletes seriously aspiring to advance to the next level. That is, elite participation has essentially gone from constituting a relative advantage to fulfilling a tacit requirement. Further, tied up in that requirement is an expectation that those truly dedicated to playing in college will provide or acquire the resources necessary to participate. Hence, as involvement in this commercialized field becomes more rule than exception, it is necessary to examine more closely the implications for equality and access.

### *Equality and access*

Considering all that goes into participating in these fields, this market-based youth sports system favors those with access to resources. Whether it be well-off parents paying expenses associated with traveling to watch their sons play, or low-income players receiving the latest fashions in shoes and apparel for free, private money paid on each player's behalf sustains the field. Thus, those youth with neither the means to cover costs nor the relationships necessary to grant them access to subsidies are at a distinct disadvantage. Further, the point about expectations of participation in elite national events suggests that those without ample socio-economic support may fall to the margins. The implication is that these young people are left to play at interscholastic and other non-profit events, which may not afford them the same cache among recruiters. Moreover, there are sports—such as lacrosse—whose equipment costs alone are prohibitive to low-income athletes (regardless of whether they operate in the for-profit sector or not), thereby limiting their options. Organizations such as the Northern California Junior Lacrosse Association and City Lacrosse (based in San Francisco)—who support access for underrepresented youth—are thus instrumental in expanding opportunities in these sports. Still, even the efforts of the non-profit sector underscore the ultimate prominence of the for-profit realm.

At the Northern California tryout for the ANLC event, a handful of the players trying out (and nearly all of the non-white players present) were sponsored by one of these Bay Area programs that teach inner-city youth the game and fields a team for them before helping them get to the high school level. What is striking is that a program devoted to enhancing the skills and opportunities to compete for low-income lacrosse aspirants would sponsor individuals to try out for a commercial recruiting event. The suggestion is that even non-profit organizations committed to equity in the sport must invest in the private elite field as a mechanism towards advancement. At the same time this speaks to the need for non-profit advocacy and partnerships in the market environment so that underrepresented youth can have a more reasonable chance to participate. While the availability of greater resources in the commercial

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sector has the potential to generate additional subsidies to support those in need, it is apparent that it is not a sector that is built to serve everyone. Hence, such a system should attempt to account for and remedy inequity in access. That said, the market context also presents built-in inequalities for its participants

As important as the discussion of access is to understanding the dynamics of privilege within market-influenced youth fields, internal stratification is also of great significance. As these systems are designed for various parties to identify and extract the best talent available, it follows that certain inequalities are fundamental to their function. For example, club teams from the same age group pay the same registration fee to enter the same event and yet may play in facilities and in front of college coaches that are significantly disparate in quality and prominence. This is because the designation of teams to different bracket tiers and the quality of the event features offered correspond with the perceived quality of prospects on teams (starting with the sponsored teams at the top). Simply put, those who appear to have less to offer get offered less. Ultimately, the commercial success of these grassroots marketing ventures depends on an optimal balance of volume with elite talent level of participants. Consequently, the inclination is to showcase the best in attendance while still encouraging as many as possible to attend. As discussed in earlier chapters, those with the greatest talent will pay the least out of their own pockets (this holds true for individual players as well as teams). This appears to be less a callous or malicious phenomenon than a practical reality of an ambitious strategy. Nevertheless, this reality does not foster an equally constructive environment for all youth involved. This is particularly significant when considering the schooling realm. Granting dramatically different experiences to students who contribute the same level of inputs in a market environment is neither sound (nor productive) education policy, nor is it fair. Nevertheless, in reviewing the comments of the various actors from this study, it is apparent that organizations serving youth often judge themselves and their peers based on the quality of their best members/players, hence it is those members who receive the most resources. Thus, from this perspective, this aspect of the market approach runs counter to a more inclusive or equitable educational mission. If an educational institution builds its reputation or capacity for dividends based on its elite, it still has an obligation to provide for its least decorated.

### Conclusion

The purpose of this case study was to utilize an institutional lens to explore a commercialized realm of youth life that has been under-researched. Further, this analysis provides a means to both understand the significance of this contemporary phenomenon as a component of the educational journey, as well as draw parallels for considering implications of privatization in schooling. The concept of private market influences in public education has been so polarizing that it is difficult to read or engage the debate based solely on objective evidence. Of course, objectivity can prove challenging in any substantive contested educational discussion, and yet even a meta-analysis of studies on the effectiveness of privatized schooling measures often yields inconclusive results. Thus, without providing a comprehensive examination of schooling, this project offers conceptual tools to analyze some key considerations pertaining to the merits of privatization in public schooling fields.

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The incorporation of the institutional lens in this study challenges conventional notions around youth sports as well as corporate behavior as they pertain to these elite institutional fields. The notion of sports being an obsession of young black boys and poor kids with grand dreams of fame and fortune is called into question by three findings. First, both data from other studies (cited in earlier chapters) as well as this project's demonstration of the prevalence of the elite grassroots field in more affluent sports such as lacrosse show that participation in organized youth sports is most prominent among families of higher socio-economic status. Second, regardless of the sport, the grassroots infrastructure generally favors well-off families who can afford to devote additional resources to making their children more competitive candidates for college admission. Third, the commercial organizations that support the grassroots elite system actively seek to attract the most talented young athletes across backgrounds with a range of material inducements, which thereby create greater incentive for more intense participation. These findings, combined with the additional data compiled in this study, suggest that dedication to sports is hardly a sign of cultural deficit for black youth, but rather it in many ways serves as a general strategy towards academic mobility. Moreover, those families who participate in these institutional fields actively seek to assert their demands for services from the organizations competing for their patronage. Accordingly, the manner in which these organizations compete speaks to the importance of understanding these actors' behaviors from an institutional perspective.

The literature review in Chapter 2 asserts that opponents of market influences in public schooling question business actors' capacity to prioritize student needs over technical efficiency. Nevertheless, in applying institutional theory to the analysis of the business actors in the athletic fields studied, this study problematizes that assertion by suggesting that in such a competitive field where expectations loom large, the pursuit of legitimacy is as much a part of business strategy as technical efficiency. That is, institutional demands carry significant weight in the operations of profit-driven firms, which thus lends greater influence to the needs of families, among others. The most valuable take away from this is that organizations operating in highly institutionalized fields marked by deep-seated norms may not merely follow largely technically-oriented business strategies, and thus their behaviors become unpredictable in a sense. Hence, it is difficult to determine the effectiveness of market influences in public youth sectors in advance, as it largely depends on the pressures they face within the field, as well as their responses. If adidas cannot be taken seriously as a basketball or lacrosse brand, the quality and efficiency of their production will not matter as consumers will not take them seriously. Thus, they have to do what is necessary to look the part—even if it means ultimately sacrificing efficiency—, which may open up opportunities for more of the needs of students and their families to get met. In any case, the fact that such a system even exists in the realm of youth sports presents thought-provoking implications for sports, education, and society in general.

Perhaps the most important conclusion drawn from this study is that the elite youth sports field in the United States mirrors a larger theme that transcends the athletic realm. The market for commercialized youth services continues to grow, such that firms are able to identify more ways to gain revenue from families willing to spend money in pursuit of their children's goals. Unfortunately, race and culture have too often been used to obscure the true nature of this phenomenon. Those who make claims about the obsession of African Americans



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or other cultural groups with sports apparently miss the fact that youth athletics represents a thriving commercial sector in which various organizations and families across backgrounds invest heavily in one another.

While there are certainly related cases of flagrant exploitation and misguided expectations that occur within some marginalized communities, the belief in sports as a means of advancement is merely reflective of the values of the more privileged general society. Moreover, this youth athletics market mechanism emphasizes and capitalizes on the most talented individuals and yet also affords those individuals opportunities to marshal resources to compete and attain their goals. Consequently, if intense sports participation is a significant attribute of the middle and elite classes, the implication is that sports participation on its own cannot explain away the black-white achievement gap, particularly among young males in America. Perhaps this contributes an inconvenient depth to the consideration of educational policy issues. It is difficult to boil down a large-scale phenomenon of educational dysfunction to an apparent affinity for basketball or even to the distinction between public and private management of public instruction institutions. The good news is that at their best, both sectors of educational and athletic institutions allow underrepresented students to thrive. Yet, the reality is that public systems typically possess more capacity to support greater proportions of the population. Moreover, greater wealth yields greater capacity to navigate in and out of the private system and access a broader range of opportunities. Hence, considerations around how to serve youth must center on best practices for each respective institution, regardless of the sector, as well as on ensuring access to quality opportunities to the greatest number of youth possible.

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