

TRUE SPORT-PHILIA DIALOGUE SERVES UP A MENU FOR BUILDING TRUE SPORT COMMUNITIES

by Wendy Long

VANCOUVER – Good ideas are often the simplest ideas. And sometimes the best ideas are conceived in simple, informal surroundings rather than boardrooms, classrooms, or conference centres offering power point presentations, stale air and uncomfortable chairs.

Many songwriters, poets and authors have talked about writing their best lyrics and lines on napkins – the muse striking as they savoured a cappuccino at their local coffee shop or enjoyed a plate of calamari at the neighbourhood bistro.

The fertile imaginations of writers J. R. R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis were fed, watered and inspired by the fare, conversation and camaraderie at the Eagle and Child Pub, the gathering place of their authors' group The Inklings. Indeed, who among us has not tried to solve the world's problems in conversation around the family dinner table or between hands of Tuesday Night Bridge?

So it was that representatives from sport, community, political and advocacy groups gathered in Vancouver May 31-June 1 for the True Sport-Philia Dialogue on building True Sport Communities, featuring the True Sport Café. The purpose of the two-day event was to explore how sport can create more vibrant and inclusive communities and how communities can develop and include sport programs that serve the needs of all residents.

In short, how do we establish a True Sport community that celebrates the core values of fairness, excellence and inclusion through sport and, in turn, recognizes the building of personal character and community that can come via sport?

The process began with an evening panel discussion which, despite its formal look, ignited passionate responses from audience members and diverse insights from panel members: Olympic rowing medallist Silken Laumann; LegaciesNow Society President and Vancouver Olympic 2010 director Marion Lay; Vancouver City Manager Judy Rogers; developer and past-chair of the Canadian International Dragon Boat Festival Society Robert Fung; elite karate competitor and Esteem Team co-founder Lisa Ling; and lawyer, businessman and triathlete Stephen O'Keefe.

Moderator Eric Young, who for 25 years has been engaged in developing strategies and campaigns to promote social change, initiated

the proceedings with an invitation to delegates to imagine the future by asking: "What would our communities be like if we truly had True Sport?"

Consider the perspective of Laumann, whose distinguished athletic career began in humble fashion as she joined her school's 500-mile running club even though she had to walk the prescribed distance until she became fit enough to run. She became a competent high school track and field competitor before turning her attention to rowing.

While extolling the virtues of attaining goals and personal challenges via competition – which Laumann fears has become a negative aspect of sport in Canada – she also stressed the need for children to have both structured and unstructured sport via good, old fashioned play.

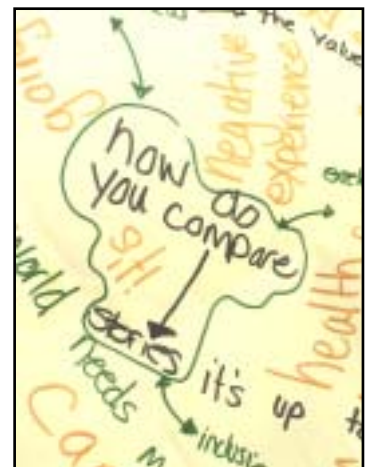
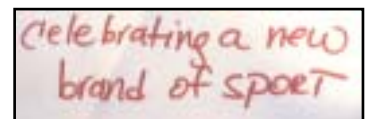
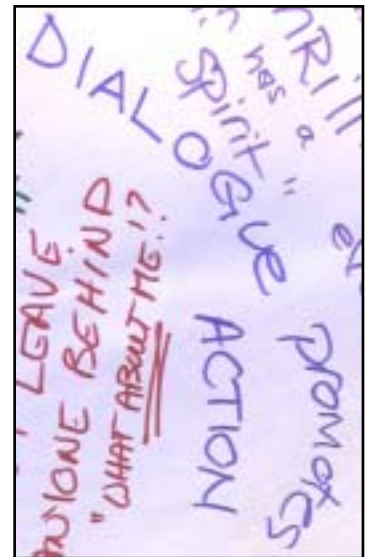
"Play was really a big part of my life and the foundation of how I became an Olympic athlete," she explained. "I don't see kids having the same opportunities to fall in love with sport, to be able to play on the streets in neighbourhoods, having sport and play as part of life. I'm passionate about reconnecting play and sport in the community."

Indeed, Laumann spoke for many delegates in the room in pinpointing a disturbing social trend that has parents driving their children to school and keeping them busy with indoor activities due to a perception that it is too dangerous "out there." The time has come for us to take back the streets and parks so that our children can be active, and ultimately healthier, again.

"I want my children to walk to school," she said. "We have a fear of letting our children out on the street."

Lisa Ling also highlighted the importance of sport as a unifier of neighbourhoods and communities in these days where neighbourhood residents rarely interact, or even know each other's names as they go from car to garage to home in solitude. She cited common mailboxes in residence complexes as one opportunity for neighbours to talk and connect, and noted parks and streets filled with youngsters playing road hockey can serve the same purpose.

Throughout the evening many problems and perceptions about sport in Canada were identified: Competition versus participation; inclusion and accessibility to programs for



LOOK AT
GROWTH OF
VANCOUVER SUN
FUN RUN
"COMMUNITY"



Value of sport
Value of play

ME / I
US / WE

everyone; building, maintaining and accessing facilities; skill development; coaching certification; family and community support; combining academic and sporting opportunities and recognizing the importance of both.

Robert Fung stressed the need for governments, developers and sporting groups to work together to ensure sport facilities and park space are available to everyone. "If you want your kids to play in the park they need to have one," he said.

The Vancouver Sun Run and Canadian International Dragon Boat Festival were recognized as events that might be regarded as True Sport activities. While both ventures feature an elite athlete component in the program, the majority of participants are average folks who cite fitness, camaraderie and challenge as reasons for taking part. Cultural and fundraising components are also integral to the events, as is participation by athletes with a disability.

Stephen O'Keefe brought an outstanding perspective to the panel as an athlete, adventurer, lawyer and businessman who was born profoundly deaf. For him, sport has served as a vehicle not only for personal challenge but as an important connector to peers and friends. He urged all participants to recognize the value of sport for persons with disabilities as it serves as a unifying and inclusive force for everyone in society.

"Sport has been really great for me," said O'Keefe, whose accomplishments include competing in Ironman triathlons. "In some aspects of life I often felt left out, but when I played sports with my classmates it was a big part of my life because it was very inclusive. Sport give such a sense of accomplishment, and it can be anything, you don't have to do an Ironman."

Special Olympian Ken McLean also described to panelists and participants the difference sport has made in his life. He is slated to compete for Canada in nordic skiing at the 2005 Special Olympics World Winter Games in Nagano, Japan.

"I have to do a lot of training; sport helps to show we are just as capable as anyone else," he said. "I used to be very quiet. I had a rough time growing up. The doctor said to my parents: 'You have a retarded child, he won't be able to walk or talk.' Well, I have proven them wrong. Being involved in sport has changed my life."

The evening was summed up most passionately by a participant troubled by narrow interpretations of sport that pervade mass media and are accepted by many individuals – values that counter a notion of True Sport.

"At the core is a transformation of consciousness," she declared. "Implicit for me is wanting to transform or reclaim what we mean by sport, so that we appropriate it back from commercialization and from the narrow definition that first place is the only thing that matters. We need to come back to talking about sport being an embodiment of the things we care about most. That is an enormous exercise in counteracting a very large machinery that is having us think the other way."

The True Sport Café

If the evening panel offered food for thought, the next day was truly a smorgasbord of discovery and discussion. Delegates arrived to find round tables adorned with crisp tablecloths and vases of flowers. Side tables were laden with food. Large sheets of paper and colourful felt pens were distributed with organizers encouraging participants to draw, write or illustrate whatever ideas might develop.

And in the spirit of café conversation that has throughout human history produced extraordinary ideas and insight, participants in the café were asked to sit around the tables in groups and ponder three pivotal issues:

- What would a True Sport community look like?
- Why True Sport Communities matter.
- How do we create a True Sport community?

The task proved both onerous and enlightening as each delegate contributed valuable insight based on personal experience and commitment. One participant envisioned her True Sport community as one where her poverty and at-risk youth program athletes might once again access a park currently littered with drug paraphernalia and occupied by homeless people; and how those homeless people might in turn be encouraged to support or cheer on the sporting activity of the children at that park.

In answering the first question another group produced a collage featuring the Yin-Yang symbol, illustrating the polarization of sport that has notions of high performance, excellence, competition, achievement and goal-setting on one side, with participation, inclusion, fun and

infrastructure on the other. A True Sport community must value and include both sides.

In the end, groups recognized fun and play as core values for a True Sport community which also promotes a spectrum of activities that promote personal growth, health, participation, inclusion, aspirations of excellence and, ultimately, the betterment of society.

Delegates had no problem discussing the second issue: The importance of creating True Sport communities. Intrinsic in that creation is a bevy of related advantages such as increased economic benefit, environmental awareness, cooperation, building leadership, safety, citizenship, inclusion of marginalized groups and individuals, better health and quality of life. "It's how we want to live," declared one participant.

The third question – how to create True Sport communities – proved most elusive as participants discovered it is easier to find fault or to ponder how things should be and harder to discover workable solutions.

"Go Granular" was one participant's suggestion. This implies the need to start at the most basic level rather than imposing changes from the top down. Each grain of individual effort contributes to the sandbox of success. It also became apparent that each individual has a visceral notion of what True Sport might be and it is crucial for that individual to act on that personal feeling.

For an adult with no history of athletic participation, that action might be as simple as offering to walk a group of neighbourhood children to the park, then supervise as they play whatever games they see fit to invent. Elite athletes might offer to mentor or coach younger athletes. Parents can encourage their children to get off the computer and away from the television and go play outside – even better would be the parents also going outside to join in the play.

And professional athletes could be encouraged to adopt and work for True Sport values in their disciplines to counteract the negative notion that sport is solely about money, power and winning.

Creating True Sport communities must currently be seen as a work in progress. While the two-day event offered a blueprint for identifying key components for True Sport communities, it also highlighted challenges that must be recognized and accepted as part of the move toward change.

Perhaps the greatest hurdle is deciding how to get started, and that task will differ as each community has a unique set of issues and individuals. Also important is designing and implementing plans to encourage children and adults to become more active and to create programs and build facilities that ensure availability and inclusivity.

Given that sport participation can have such a positive and powerful impact on the lives of individuals with disabilities, at-risk youth, low income families and seniors, it is imperative that sport be synonymous with access and inclusivity in communities. Special Olympian Ken McLean summed up the issue best in using the acronym TEAM: "Together Everyone Achieves More," he said.

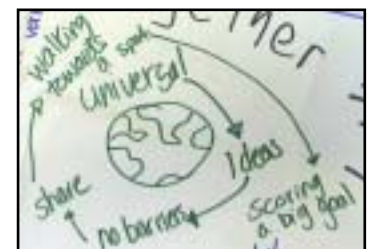
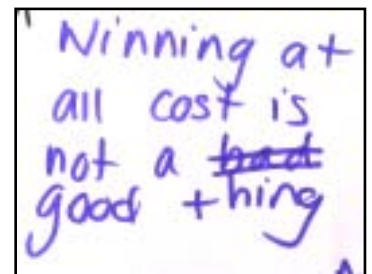
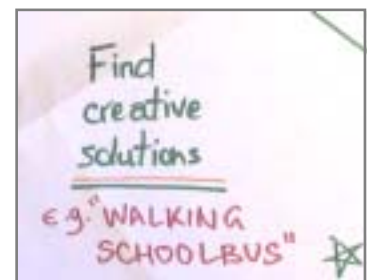
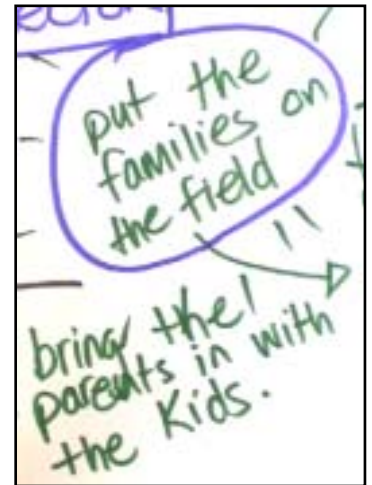
And at the core of the debate is deciding how we get back to appreciating sport as a vehicle for personal growth and a public asset instead of as an entertainment entity that accentuates aspects of societal decay such as greed, cheating and narcissism.

As Victor Lachance, head of the Sport Matters Group, noted enthusiastically: "True Sport is about fulfilling our potential. It's about, ultimately, the sport we want. We want for sport to fulfill its potential and to fulfill our potential, to make us better – as participants, as volunteers, as citizens, as communities. True Sport is Good Sport."

The True Sport-Philia Dialogue in Vancouver served as an organizational and inspirational starting block. It is now up to other Canadian communities to run with the ideas and challenges that were identified in Vancouver and start their own Dialogue and Café events while working to become True Sport communities.

Clearly, there is a feeling in our country that something has gone awry in the way we perceive, present and experience sport. Canadians consider sport to be an important aspect of their lives. But does sport, as it exists today, actually reflect the average Canadian's definition of sport and sporting values?

Set the table. Brew the coffee. Send out invitations. And get talking about what sport means to you and how you can utilize sport to better yourself and your community.



TRUE SPORT

Makes us better.

True Sport is a national movement committed to the belief that Canadian sport can, should, and will make a powerful positive contribution to the development of people and communities. It is anchored in a set of core values – fairness, inclusion and excellence. These values grow out of what Canadians believe is important and want to see manifested in sport. They apply across all sports and at all levels of sport, from individuals, teams and schools, to leagues, associations, communities – even cities. True Sport seeks to engage sport organizations at all levels in communities across Canada to promote values-driven sport that is inclusive and welcoming to all, and that lives up to its potential for helping to build strong, healthy and vibrant communities.

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The Philia Dialogue on Citizenship was founded on a simple belief: that the well-being, health and strength of our society requires the presence and diverse engagement of all citizens. Our inspiration for reconsidering our views on citizenship stems from our roots within the disability community. It is our conviction that welcoming the presence and participation of individuals who have been labeled and marginalized will transform our society. We therefore want to ensure that the wisdom, talent and experiences of the disability community are reflected in all our discussions and actions. We seek to join with others who share our interest in nurturing a more caring, inclusive and neighbourly society, and to serve as a vessel for ideas, discussion and dialogue between the disability community and the larger community.

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