

INCREASING YOUTH SPORT PARTICIPATION

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Title: An innovative approach to increasing youth sport participation: The case of Baseball5™

Abstract

Youth sport participation preferences are evolving and shifting towards unorganized, non-traditional types of sport participation (Jeanes et al., 2019). This trend has left more traditional sports with decreasing participation numbers. Baseball Canada noticed a similar trend, and therefore implemented an innovative approach to increase interest and participation in baseball. This case study follows Alex, the Manager of Sport Development at Baseball Canada as they develop and evaluate Baseball5™, an innovative street version of the traditional sport of baseball. This alternative form of baseball needs to be tested and evaluated in five pilot programs throughout Canada. Alex collects survey, interview, and focus group data following each of the pilot programs to determine whether the approach is viable for increasing interest in baseball long-term. After reading the case, students are tasked with analyzing the collected data, and designing the Baseball5™ program for long-term implementation. The case is ideal for upper-year undergraduate students who have the skills and knowledge necessary to execute program evaluations and build holistic program implementation plans, and for undergraduate courses in research methods or data analysis.

Keywords: Program evaluation; Mixed methods: Survey; Focus groups; Transtheoretical model

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Introduction

Alex has always been passionate about baseball and sport participation. Growing up, they spent hours on the baseball diamond playing catch with friends and fielding ground balls with their older siblings. When Alex was looking for a job after completing their undergraduate degree in Sport Management, they were fortunate that Baseball Canada, the national sport organization (NSO) for the sport of baseball in Canada, was hiring a new staff member. Now, almost 10 years later, Alex was working in their dream job; they were the Manager of Sport Development at Baseball Canada. As a part of this role, Alex had the opportunity to travel around the country attending baseball events and helping communities grow their local baseball programs.

Following a particularly exciting grassroots baseball event that had lower than expected registration, Alex began reflecting on their experience over the past few years and the state of the sport they love. Unfortunately, over the past few seasons, Alex has noticed that communities were having a hard time getting people, particularly youth, interested in baseball and engaged in local leagues, and keeping them engaged. This was troubling, as Alex knew that their job was important given the importance of physical activity and sport participation in general. Alex wanted to work hard to share baseball with others as much as possible; this was, after all, one of the main reasons Alex wanted to work for Baseball Canada in the first place.

Upon returning to the NSO head office, Alex began investigating participation trends in sport more generally, and baseball specifically. Alex started to formulate a plan for how participation and retention could be improved in baseball in the upcoming seasons. They felt that with an innovative plan, and with the support of the board of directors and baseball communities across Canada, participation numbers could eventually improve.

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Baseball and Sport Participation Trends

Generally, there has been a noted decline in recent years in sport and physical activity participation amongst Canadian youth (Doull et al., 2018). Unfortunately, Alex could only find specific data for Baseball dating back to 2011. They found that participation in baseball among Canadian youth had been steadily declining from 21.1% of Canadian youth participating in baseball in 1998 (Statistics Canada, n.d.) to only 10% of Canadian youth participating in baseball *or* softball in 2011 (Canadian Fitness & Lifestyle Research Institute, 2011). Through their informal communication with communities across Canada, Alex felt that this trend has continued to spiral downwards up until this day. Part of Alex's role at Baseball Canada is to help grow the sport of baseball in Canada across all disciplines (e.g., women's baseball, men's baseball, baseball for persons with disabilities, and various grassroots programs). Of course, it would be a massive undertaking to tackle all of these disciplines through one program, so Alex decided to focus their efforts on youth because positive sport experiences during childhood are a strong predictor of sport participation in adulthood (Miller & Siegel, 2017). Thus, Alex decided that a logical starting point for increasing participation in baseball would be at the youth grassroots level.

When investigating why participation in baseball had been declining among youth, Alex found that youth sport trends were changing in Canada, and in many other countries globally. Alex found that youth were gravitating towards non-traditional (e.g., rock climbing), unorganized sports (e.g., free play), and away from traditional, organized sporting opportunities like baseball (Jeanes et al., 2019; Turner, 2013). Although the majority of Canadian children still participate in some form of sport, Alex was surprised to see that the amount of daily participation is not enough to meet daily physical activity recommendations (ParticipACTION, 2020). Specifically, Alex found

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that children aged five to 11 years have been reported to participate an average of 17 minutes per day in organized sports, while youth aged 12-15 years have been reported to participate an average of 34 minutes per day in organized or unorganized sport (ParticipACTION, 2020). Alex saw that the findings from the recent ParticipACTION (2020) report on Canadian youth physical activity were in alignment with global youth sport trends like those in the United Kingdom (Tannehill et al., 2015) and Australia (Eime et al., 2010; Vella et al., 2014), countries with similar sport systems to that of Canada. Based on their research, Alex noticed that the recent ParticipACTION (2020) report on Canadian youth physical activity indicates that youth might be reducing their participation in organized sport, but continuing to participate in sport in an unorganized fashion.

Given these trends in sport participation and Alex's role at Baseball Canada in sport development, they had been thinking a lot about how to keep youth interested in baseball and increase participation in the sport by satisfying youths' preferences for non-traditional, unorganized participation. Baseball Canada's most recent strategic plan already highlighted specific goals related in part to Alex's role at the organization and aligned with some of the trends that Alex was noticing and read about during their research. Specifically, Baseball Canada was working towards increasing female participation in baseball, monitoring and evaluating different approaches to growing participation, and focusing on developing partnerships with other organizations to foster opportunities for growth (Baseball Canada, 2019). After much research and many discussions with their colleagues, Alex had found a new, innovative approach to stimulate interest in baseball that could have the potential to aid in achieving each of these goals and satisfy the evolving youth sport participation preferences for less traditional and less rule-bound experiences: Baseball5™.

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Pilot program context: Baseball5™

Alex learned about Baseball5™ through the World Baseball/Softball Confederation (WBSC). Baseball5™ is a fast-paced, five-on-five street game version of baseball (www.baseball5.wbsc.org). Alex found an exciting video¹ on the WBSC website and was immediately intrigued. Baseball5™ does not require any equipment other than a ball, and the playing field uses much less space than a traditional baseball diamond. Moreover, unlike more traditional forms of sport, Baseball5™ is typically played with co-ed teams (i.e., boys and girls play together). To play Baseball5™, the hitter tosses a small rubber ball to themselves and hits it with their hand before running the bases while the opposing team attempts to make an out. The purpose of Baseball5™ is to increase the accessibility of baseball and softball by limiting the equipment needed, shortening the game (five innings as opposed to nine in traditional baseball), and removing venue requirements. The sport is played by a variety of ages and is growing in popularity globally (A game for all, n.d.).

Upon learning about Baseball5™, Alex was intrigued by the prospect of a more accessible version of baseball. Alex felt as though Baseball5™ could be a unique and appropriate way to introduce baseball and some of its fundamental skills to new potential participants, and in doing so work towards goals outlined in the organization's strategic plan. Moreover, the street-style of Baseball5™ was much less formal than traditional baseball, thus a promising avenue to satisfy youth participation preferences of unorganized participation. As Baseball5™ was not yet integrated into the Canadian sport market, the novelty of the participation experience was also a promising means of satisfying the participation preference for non-traditional sport. After gathering data on baseball and sport participation in the country and developing a plan for

¹ A collection of videos about Baseball5™ can be found at <https://baseball5.wbsc.org/> or on YouTube.

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introducing Baseball5™ to Canadian communities, Alex sought and received approval from the Baseball Canada board of directors and chief executive officer (CEO) to move forward. Alex was granted approval to test this new form of baseball in a series of pilot programs to determine whether Baseball5™ could be a viable avenue for increasing youth participation in baseball. The Board of Directors agreed to dedicate \$15,000 of their contingency budget to support this project. This allowed Alex to test the program in five different regions and contexts across the country, and to evaluate each of the pilot programs. The main questions that Alex and Baseball Canada were interested in answering included;

- 1) What were the coordinators' experiences with the Baseball5™ pilot program?
 - a. What did coordinators find went well?
 - b. What would coordinators change for future programs?
- 2) What were the participants experiences with the Baseball5™ pilot program?
 - a. What did participants like about the program?
 - b. What would participants change about the program?
 - c. How did the participants feel about participating in a co-ed league?
 - i. Were there any significant differences between girls and boys' experiences?
 - d. What skills did the participants learn?
 - e. What skills transferred to Baseball5™ from other sports or activities?
- 3) What was the participants' overall satisfaction with the Baseball5™ pilot program?
 - a. What would motivate participants to participate again?
 - b. What are barriers to future participation?

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Pilot program structure

Each of the five pilot programs were organized and run slightly differently, given they were each held by Baseball Canada in conjunction with local baseball organizations, community centres, or schools. However, each pilot program was given a package from Baseball Canada including team t-shirts and hats, the Baseball5™ ball, detailed instructions, and guidelines. Each program was asked to assign a coordinator who was responsible for implementing the program, running the individual sessions, and recording specific statistics and results from each of the games played. Alex and each of the provincial baseball organizations were also at the disposal of the coordinators of each of the pilot programs should they have any issues in running or understanding the game. The five pilot programs were set-up as follows:

Richmond, BC

In Richmond, BC, the Baseball5™ pilot program was held in an elementary school and was open to all grade five, six, and seven students (approximately aged 10-13 years) to sign-up. A limited number of registration spots were open, however, and therefore there may have been more students interested in playing than were able to participate. The program included four teams, and games were played during the students' lunch hour over the course of six weeks. A total of 24 students participated. The program culminated in a championship game, and a teacher-student game where the winning team competed against a team of teachers. The program was coordinated in part by a local baseball organization alongside one of the teachers at the school.

Edmonton, AB

The Baseball5™ pilot program in Edmonton, AB was held at a middle school and was coordinated by the provincial Baseball organization and one of the physical education teachers. This pilot program was held as a unit in the youths' physical education curriculum, and therefore

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was not voluntary. A total of 115 students participated across grades five to eight. The pilot program ran for a total of three weeks.

Halifax, NS

The Halifax, NS pilot program was held at an elementary school and was structured as a voluntary after school program. The program was run by the provincial baseball organization alongside one of the physical education teachers at the school. Students aged nine to 11 years participated in Baseball5™ over the course of two weeks. Thirty-three students participated on four teams. Like the pilot program in Richmond, the Halifax program was voluntary however spots were limited and therefore may have left some students out who may have wanted to participate.

Trois-Rivières, QC

In Trois-Rivières, QC, the Baseball5™ pilot program was run by a local baseball organization and was hosted out of a community centre. As such, youth were invited to sign-up and play outside of the school environment. Twenty-four youth aged nine to 12 years signed up and were divided amongst four teams to play in a condensed league format. The Trois-Rivières pilot program took place over four weeks.

Montréal, QC

The Montréal, QC pilot program was set-up similarly to the Trois-Rivières pilot program and was organized by a local baseball organization. The program was organized at a community centre, so children were able to sign-up outside of the school environment. Twenty-four youth aged nine to 14 years signed up and were divided amongst four teams. Montréal had the largest age range of all the pilot programs. The Montréal pilot program occurred over the course of four weeks.

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Baseball5™ program evaluation

Given the purpose and the main questions that Alex and Baseball Canada had determined for the project, Alex decided to evaluate the Baseball5™ program by conducting surveys with all the participants, interviews with program coordinators, and focus groups with select participants at each pilot location. After each pilot program was completed, Alex travelled across the country and conducted the interviews and focus groups with each group. The total number of participants at each stage of evaluation, along with details of each pilot program are outlined in table 1.

Ultimately, Alex was going to evaluate the pilot projects, based on all collected data. A final report had to be presented to the board of directors and Baseball Canada CEO within one month after completion of the final pilot project. This would allow Baseball Canada to make an informed decision if, and how to best proceed with the program moving forward.

Surveys

Surveys were provided to all participants upon completion of the pilot project. The same survey was used for all of the groups and investigated the youth participants' experience with the Baseball5™ program. Alex included items in the survey such as "I enjoyed participating in the Baseball5™ program", "Playing Baseball5™ taught me new skills". To determine if the participants intended to try baseball in the future, the following items were included: "If given the opportunity, I would play baseball". All items were measured on a 5-point Likert-scale (from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The survey also gathered basic demographic information so that data analysis could determine any differences in responses between male and female participants and address one of Baseball Canada's key strategic goals regarding the participation of girls in baseball. The survey is available in Appendix A.

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Focus Groups

Focus groups were held with select youth participants from each pilot program. A total of eight focus groups were held across the five Baseball5™ programs. During the focus groups, youth participants were asked about their general experience and satisfaction with the program. During focus group discussions, participants had the opportunity to express what they liked and what they would change or improve about the program should it be held in the future. Participants were also asked about what, if anything, they learnt from Baseball5™, and if they would consider playing either Baseball5™ or traditional baseball again. The focus group guide is available in Appendix B.

Interviews

Alex conducted interviews with each of the pilot program coordinators, for a total of seven interviews. The interviews were designed to understand what went well, and what could be improved regarding the logistics of the pilot programs, as well as the overall success of the Baseball5™ program. Alex also wanted to understand how the instructors perceived the experiences of the youth participants. Instructors were asked questions such as “What would you tell other interested groups about the Baseball5™ program?” and “What would you have done differently in running the pilot program?”. The interview guide is available in Appendix C.

Data Analysis and Next Steps

Upon returning to the Baseball Canada office after collecting all the Baseball5™ program evaluation data, Alex was excited and hopeful for the future of the program. However, they now had the task of analyzing the data, and to compile recommendations in the final report, so the Board of Directors could make an informed decision if, and how to move forward with this new program. Taking the role of Alex, it is now your job to analyze the collected focus group, interview,

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and survey data, needed to provide a set of recommendations your report for the Board of Directors for how to implement the Baseball5™ program long-term. In order to do so, you will need to complete a case analysis and be prepared to engage in a class discussion about the case. This involves the steps that follow;

1. Identifying key pieces of information relevant to the case (e.g., name, role, and title of the decisionmaker, the main issues in the case, why these are important, the timeline of possible program implementation)
2. Analyzing the program evaluation data provided to you by your instructor in order to answer the program evaluation questions.
3. Evaluating the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of Baseball Canada and the Baseball5™ program
4. Generating one or more solutions for the case (i.e., recommendations regarding how to implement Baseball5™ long-term) based on the data analyzed, and providing rationale for each option
 - a. Consider who would be involved, where and when the program would occur, how it would be organized, what resources would be needed, as well as the technical implementation of Baseball5™ (e.g., number of players involved, rule modifications, etc.)

Questions for in-class discussion:

- Did any aspect of the case resonate with you? Why?
- Did you find anything about the case content particularly challenging?
- How did you arrive at your answers?
- How do your answers differ from others' answers?

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- Can you think of any other possible answers?
- What needs to be achieved?
 - o How will it be achieved?
 - o Who is responsible for achieving it?
- Do you have a contingency plan?
- Is this an industry you can see yourself working in?
 - o Why or why not?

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Table 1

Pilot Program Participants

Location	Number of Pilot Participants	Age Ranges (years)	Interviews	Completed Surveys	Focus Groups
Edmonton	115; all grade 5 to 8 classes	12 to 14	1	97	3
Richmond	24; 4 teams	10 to 13	2	21	2
Montréal	24; 4 teams	9 to 14	2	19	1
Halifax	33; 4 teams	9 to 11	2	21	2
Trois-Rivières	24; 4 teams	9 to 12	1	21	0

Appendix A

Baseball5™ Participant Survey

YOUR EXPERIENCE WITH THE BASEBALL5 PROGRAM

In which location did you participate? (please circle one)

EDMONTON ___ RICHMOND ___ MONTREAL ___ HALIFAX ___ TROIS-RIVIÈRES ___

When thinking about the Baseball5 program,	Strongly Disagree				Strongly Agree
	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
1. I enjoyed participating in the Baseball5 program	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2. I liked being exposed to a new sport	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
3. I liked participating with both boys and girls	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
4. The instructor helped me to play Baseball5	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
5. Playing Baseball5 taught me new skills	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
6. I was able to play Baseball5 because of my other sport skills (like running, catching, throwing)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
7. If given the opportunity, I would play Baseball5 again	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
8. If given the opportunity, I would play Baseball	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

If I had to pick between playing Baseball5 or Baseball, I would pick (please select one)

BASEBALL5 _____ BASEBALL _____

GENERAL INFORMATION

What is your sex?

Male _____ Female _____ Other _____

How old are you?

Appendix B

Baseball5™ Participant Focus Group Guide

General Questions

1. How did you hear about Baseball5?
2. If your friends had questions about Baseball5 what would you tell them?
3. What makes Baseball5 different from other sports or games?
4. How did you feel about baseball before you played Baseball5?

Experience and Program Satisfaction

1. What did you like most about Baseball5?
2. What about Baseball5 could have been better?
 - a. What would you change about Baseball5?

Learning

1. What did you learn from Baseball5?
2. What skills did you use when you played Baseball5?

Future participation

1. Would you want to play Baseball5 again?
 - a. Why or why not?
2. Given the opportunity would you rather play Baseball5 or baseball?
 - a. Why?

Wrap-up Question

1. Can you share anything else about your experience with Baseball5?

Appendix C

Baseball5™ Instructor Interview Guide

1. Can you start by explaining your role with Baseball5 and Baseball Canada?
2. What was your experience with Baseball5 prior to running the pilot?
3. Can you describe how the pilot was structured at your location?
4. What did you find went well throughout the program?
5. What would you tell another interested school/community group about Baseball5?
6. If you were in charge of Baseball5 overall, what would you change?
7. What would you have done differently in running your pilot?
8. How did the children react to the co-ed requirements of the program?
9. How could the children have been more engaged/learnt more/etc.?
10. What skills are used during Baseball5?
11. How are those skills transferable to other sports?
 - a. How are those skills transferrable to life in general?
12. Can you share anything else about your experience with Baseball5?