


Imaging Community: Women's Ice Hockey, High Performance Sport and Rural Survival in Southern Alberta

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Context

Purpose: Examine the impact of the Warner Hockey School (WHS) on the village of Warner and the potential role of high-performance sport in community survival and revitalization.



Specific objectives – identify and analyze:

- Why the WHS was established and the process that the community undertook to make the school a reality;
- How the 'imagined community' of Warner came to include high performance hockey;
- The role of elite hockey academies in the Canadian hockey system and the impact of such schools on women's hockey;
- The potential role that high performance sport might play in Canadian rural survival.




Methods

- Case study design
- Multiple qualitative data collection strategies:
 - Analysis of school and community documents;
 - Semi-structured interviews with community members, school and hockey school staff, informed hockey experts, and past players (n=32);
 - Participant observation at village council meetings, school events, hockey galas, showcase camps, and games.

Uncertainty despite success

- Since 2003, WHS has helped Warner accomplish its central goal: to retain kindergarten to grade 12 schooling.
- The WHS is a nationally and internationally recognized elite female hockey program (2015 JWHL Champions).
- Over 90% of WHS players pursue hockey careers at post-secondary level in CIS and NCAA, many with scholarships.
- Warner interviewees: WHS has "saved the village."
- But, WHS visibility and team success has not led to community revitalization or development.
- Result: Villager dissonance



Imagining community

- Warner residents have a strong connection to history of the town, family, and school. Strong commitment to future prosperity of the community.
- Hockey players, while invited and welcomed, do not share the same intimate connection.
- Players view Warner as a timely destination, a place to pursue excellence and educational advancement with the end goal of a university scholarship and/or a place on the national team.



A culture of elitism: Opportunity and threat

- In 2003, WHS was one of two female hockey academies in Canada.
- The WHS's future is threatened by the growing popularity of elite female hockey.
- Warner needs to differentiate itself from other schools, many from larger centres.
- Paradox: Success of Warner is a cause for celebration; Future of WHS and the Village of Warner is uncertain



Implications and Next Steps

- Hockey academies are highly sought out as paths to specialized coaching, increased skill development, post-secondary athletic scholarship offers, and possible selection to national and international teams.
- Further research is needed on the impact of high-performance sport academies in rural and urban centres across Canada and the benefits provided for athletes, community members and the associated schools.



Dissemination

- Presentations have been made at national and international academic conferences.
- Presentation at the University of Lethbridge. Warner community members, players, Lethbridge community members and faculty and students from the U of L in attendance.
- Papers and book chapters have been/will be submitted to sport and rural development related journals/books.
- Book project in early stages

