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Good sport environments:

**A study of collective fundamental values and their
importance for activity principles in Swedish club sport**

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importance for activity principles in Swedish club sport**

Abstract (1)

This study answers the call made by the Swedish government, the Swedish Sports Confederation (RF) and Swedish local authorities for research on success factors in Swedish club sport. By using RF's success concept and sport scholars critique in reverse as points of departure for our study we selected two "successful" sports clubs for a study of the constitution of good sport environments. Our theoretical starting point was that an organisation's collective fundamental values contribute to shaping both its goals and its practice – and in extension to its potential to constitute a good sport environment. The results, which are based on eight qualitative interviews with key individuals, show how the clubs work with society-related dilemmas and sport-specific problems. By analysing elements in the club environments which have promoted this work we have been able to get an insight into the values on which these environments rest and their importance for building good sport environments.

Keywords: successful sport clubs, expansion, decentralisation

Swedish sport research within social sciences is sometimes blamed for focusing too much on problems. One conspicuous example is the debate following on the recent report on state support to club sport (Riksidrottsförbundet, 2008a; 2008b; 2008c). Also municipality representatives have called for research that does not solely elucidate the shortcomings of club sport but also focuses on good examples and success factors (Sjöblom, 2011). The government has too in its 2012 mission to the Centre for Sport Research called for research on sport environments which are characterised by good sports activities (Kulturdepartementet, 2011). Hence, the aim of this article is to study sports clubs that are appreciated both by the sport movement and by the surrounding community and to analyse the underlying reasons for this.

Current state of research and problem approach (1)

Societally oriented sport research indicates that for a couple of decades sport has undergone a period of transition, where pluralisation-, market- and democratisation processes working in parallel have set their stamp on the field of sport – making it increasingly multifaceted but also more specialised and, consequently, contradictory (Bairner, 2010; Bergsgard & Norberg, 2010; Fahlén & Sjöblom, 2008). Parallel with the professionalisation and commercialisation of the sport movement a new sport policy has taken shape whose goal is to listen more to citizen needs and allocate resources to previously neglected groups (Karp, Eliasson, Fahlén, Löfgren, & Wickman, 2012; Sjöblom, 2007).

This is the societal sport context in researcher perspective. The actual sport context involves the ambition of sport to foster to democratic forms of social contact built on tolerance and cooperation and also sport's own competitive logic of fostering to competition and elimination. Ranking and selection take place simultaneously with the encouragement to athletes to help each other and strive towards the same goals (Hertting, 2007; Peterson, 2002; Börjeson & von

Essen, 2007). The chief impression obtained from research is that competition and elimination dominates already from childhood in many sports clubs and that the training and competition debut has crept further down the ages (Andreasson, 2007; Carlsson & Fransson, 2006; Fundberg, 2005; Riksidrottsförbundet, 2005; SOU, 2008). Besides, one out of five young athletes experiences insufficiency and pressure emanating from their parents, and the number of young people who leave sporting activities in the upper teens exceeds 65 per cent in some sports (Augustsson & Patriksson, 2007; Eliasson, 2009; Thedin Jakobsson & Engström, 2008; Wagnsson & Patriksson, 2007). Nor does everyone feel as welcome to sport as wished for in the “sport for all” goal set up by the State and the Swedish Sports Confederation (RF) (Engström, Norberg, & Åkesson, 2007; Hertting, 2010; Wickman, 2011). In addition the recruitment of leaders remains one of the major problems of the sport movement (Meckbach & Larsson, 2007). It is the women, especially, who are kept out of leading positions (Fundberg, 2003; Olofsson, 2009; Peterson, 2000; Ström & Lindgren, 2005).

How is it possible for a sports club to work successfully at solving these societally related dilemmas and sport-specific problems – and what is there in the club environment that affects the work? *What sport wants*, the sport movement’s joint policy, says that all activities should be open to everyone and that they should have a built-in ambition to continually improve and develop (Riksidrottsförbundet, 2009). These words about openness and positive development will be used in this article as a starting point for the success concept. A second starting point is taken from the sport-specific problems and societal dilemmas that have been highlighted by research and which refer in several ways to these very ideals, or to their shortcomings. Thus, critical sport research implicitly contributes to researchers’ definition of success, which seems to broadly agree with that of the sport movement itself.

How should success be studied? One conclusion we have drawn from earlier analyses of sports club environment and activities, which still is a relatively new and small research area in Sweden, is that there exist many points of comparison regarding the relation between resource creation, resource distribution and resource consumption, on the one hand, and activity focus, attitudes and ambitions, on the other – i.e. how club structures manifest joint values (Fahlén, 2006; Fahlén & Aggestål, 2011; Sjöblom, 2006; Sjöblom & Fahlén, 2010; Stenling & Fahlén, 2009). Another conclusion we draw is that there seem to be differences between sports clubs based in major municipality centres and those based in surrounding rural districts. In rural districts even the general non-sporting public is committed to the sports club and participates in its activities. The club is better at “networking” and “socialising”, cooperating with school, childcare and church and at involving local industries and the general public. On the other hand, in municipality centres the sports club generally have a bigger member base as well as a financial base (Fahlén & Sjöblom, 2008; Sjöblom, 2006).

On the basis of these conclusions and the problems sketched prior to these we have for this study selected two “successful” sports clubs, one in a city and one in a village.

Collective meaning creation – analytical framework and methodology (1)

Our analytical starting point is that the organisation’s collective fundamental values contribute to shaping both its goals and its practice. This argument builds on the assumption that organisations can be described in terms of structural elements and organisational processes, which together form patterns or contexts (Miller & Friesen, 1980a; 1980b). These are the result of collective ideas about what the actual organisation should do, how it should be done, and how the

results should be assessed. The organisational patterns are created to implement the ideas – and function simultaneously as to reinforce these patterns. The shaping of structural elements and organisational processes derives from what the organisation as a collective ascribes meaning to (Ranson, Hinings, & Greenwood, 1980). With a view to analysing collective meaning creation we focus on the organisational domain, its structural elements and organisational processes, its criteria of effectiveness and its contextual constraints (Greenwood & Hinings, 1988; Ranson, Hinings, & Greenwoods, 1980).

By studying the organisational domain, its aim and goals can be analysed. By studying the organisation's structural elements and organisational processes its way of arranging activities can be analysed. These elements and processes are operationalised via the concepts of specialisation, standardisation and centralisation. The specialisation concept analyses how an organisation distributes tasks and roles among individuals and groups. The standardisation concept describes how an organisation works with rules, guidelines and routines. The centralisation concept shows how power and authorisation are distributed. A study of an organisation's criteria of effectiveness makes it possible to assess the results of its activities, the point of time when it considers its own club successful and the way it gets about determining this. Finally, studying the organisation's contextual constraints enables the analysis of its way of adapting to the surrounding community.

The idea of the analysis frame described above is to give us an insight into the fundamental values permeating the organisation. If the sports club succeeds well, according to the RF and contemporary research definition of the concept of success, we might claim that the club's fundamental values and the practice created have formed what is the basis of the success – its good sport environment.

Study aim, selection and method (1)

We have studied two sports clubs' fundamental values and their importance to the activities of the club. The aim was to examine to what extent and in what way the clubs live up to the success concept of sport movement and research, and to discuss how far this can be said to be connected with their fundamental values.

It may seem as a too tight delimitation to be able to generalise the results. However, our main goal was not to talk about Swedish sport clubs in general but to try to understand the underlying mechanisms of successful problem-solving in an increasingly demanding environment. Therefore, we selected two designated successful clubs for an in-depth study.

To achieve this aim we made three selections to establish our study objects, our information source and our interpretation model. We initially looked for sports clubs which had attracted attention by their successes. AC Springhill (the club name is feigned and revealing contextual information is omitted from the results for ethical purposes) is held up as a model by the local municipal management for creating harmony between elite and broad sport activities and has been given a price by RF for having Sweden's best coaches. Rawley FC (the club name is feigned and revealing contextual information is omitted from the results for ethical purposes) has achieved prominence in the local municipality for highlighting and evaluating fundamental value issues and has been awarded Svenska Spel's All Fair Price. Since more than these two clubs have received these awards and are appreciated by their respective local communities, our sampling was further guided by access (Shenton & Hayter, 2004).

The second selection concerned the method for gathering data. To be able to create a collected, coherent, yet nuanced picture of organisational domain, structural elements and organisational processes, criteria of effectiveness, and contextual constraints we used a selection principle worked out by Porter and Lawler (1965) and Pugh et al. (1968) which had been adapted to a non-profit association context by Fahlén (2005a). The classification principle, aiming at creating collective accounts from individual ones by interviewing respondents from different areas in the club and on different positions, includes the hierarchic level (chairperson, operational leader, leader of activities), the task type (operative or administrative) and the type of engagement (paid or volunteer). On the basis of these three principles we interviewed one person per category and club in order to be able to create one collective meaning-creating system including accounts from all parts of the organisation, i.e. two volunteer board members with administrative tasks active on the top level in the hierarchy, two paid activity leaders with administrative tasks active on the second highest hierarchic level, two paid coaches with operative tasks active on the second lowest hierarchic level, and two volunteer youth leaders with operative tasks active on the lowest level in the hierarchy. The main purpose of this procedure was to minimise the risk of taking one person's (e.g. a chairperson's) account as the sole pretext for the collective meaning-creating system, but instead balancing several individual accounts based on different organisational experiences. In the categories where there was more than one person to choose from, our selection was randomised. Informed consent was given by all respondents prior to the data collection. The respondent's names are held anonymous for ethical purposes.

The third selection concerned our analysis of data. The interview questions were formulated on the basis of the theoretical framework (i.e. organisational domain, structural elements and organisational processes, criteria of effectiveness, and

contextual constraints) and of the operationalisations developed by Kikulis, Slack, Hinings, and Zimmerman (1989) and Slack and Hinings (1987) (i.e. the organisation's purpose and goal; its levels and nature of specialisation, standardisation and centralisation; its criteria and measurement of effectiveness; and its access to facilities and its access to financial and human resources) and adapted to a Swedish context by Fahlén (2005b) and Stenling and Fahlén (2009). The individual interviews were carried out on separate occasions on the premises of the selected clubs and varied in length between 60 and 90 minutes. The information was transcribed and analysed in four steps. First, it was reduced by the theoretical framework to enable more precise analyses. Then, the respondents' statements were compared with one another in order to analyse individual interpretation schema. In the third step the essences of the individual interpretation schemas was compiled in a collective meaning-creating system. Finally, the collective meaning-creating system was analysed by tracing the fundamental values on which the club as a whole supposedly rested. All four steps were initially taken individually by each of the two authors in order to increase inter-rater reliability in the coding and analysis of data. Information which was given by one respondent and disputed by another was omitted from the analysis in order to avoid giving more credence to one statement over another. The two authors' individual analyses were treated in a similar vain to further improve inter-rater reliability.

Sports clubs' collective fundamental values – result presentation

(1)

Context (2)

AC Springhill (3)

In the eyes of the municipality AC Springhill is a big attractive club. It is among the biggest in the municipality with a turnover of about 2.4 million SEK per year and over 750 members, most of whom are children and young people. The club

comprises a large senior and veteran organisation and many supporting members. AC Springhill has a long tradition of arranging not only sporting but also social activities, it does elite performances at Swedish top level, arranges recurrent events and commands a broad network of supporters throughout the municipality.

In the interviews networking is highlighted as an important success factor. In the words of the club chairperson:

It is absolutely necessary that some of the board members can run the club even during regular work hours and that they have specialist competences that benefit the club. The external communication with authorities and sports federations on different levels and with other clubs, industry and media takes place on a weekly basis.

For all respondents the most important factor for continued development is that the city's biggest upper secondary school will acquire an athletics/disability sport profile and the city its own disability-adapted athletics hall. The profile is supposed to help getting more young athletes to stay in the city, while the hall may create better activities for the disabled but also better conditions for the development of specific sports for the non-disabled. The hall is also of great symbolic importance.

Rawley FC (3)

Rawley FC was founded in 1954 and during its nearly 60-year history it has run a variation of activities. Today the club has about 1,000 members, 700 of whom are active athletes and the rest family members who have joined the club in the form of family membership. The main activities focus on broad child and youth sport and on football and floorball. The core of the organisation is the indoor arena and the adjacent outdoor grass pitch. The facilities are operated by Rawley

Arena Ltd, which is entirely owned by the club. Both the facility and the club headquarters are located in the small municipality of Rawley, five kilometres outside the city centre of a larger city. Nevertheless, what characterises the club is its feeling for the village community with the home address rather than any specific sport interest as the coherent link.

Rawley FC's revenues derive mainly from membership and training fees, municipal and state activity support, local subsidies and some small sums from tasks which the club performs for the local racecourse. The modest sponsor revenues accounted for are with few exceptions directly linked to child participation, that is, the parents of children who participate in activities contribute small sums and products in their roles of business managers and/or employees in some local company. The only major sponsor is a local food retailer. The total club turnover is about 1.8 million SEK per year.

Domain (2)

AC Springhill (3)

AC Springhill was founded in 1956 as a multisport club with its basis in the 4H ideas of Head, Heart, Hands and Health. Today this four-fold idea is summed up in the club's overarching goal: "Feel well instead of winning at all costs – have fun in the club to achieve great solidarity". The club is primarily an athletics club, but disability sports and social services are also included in the programme. Several parallel projects are running in the club localities together with an adult education organisation and the Employment Agency, where people who have been classified as "dropouts" by the Social Insurance Agency administer and organise various events, including sport events. The added value for the club is that members have to make major contributions, e.g. as functionaries, only when the actual events take place.

AC Springhill Special Olympics is the club section for the disabled. Its activities comprise a number of sports where some 30 people with intellectual disabilities take part. Many of them come from the municipal school for the intellectually disabled, where the chair of the section teaches. In his opinion, Special Olympics makes a great contribution to the goodwill of AC Springhill in demonstrating that everyone is welcome. To the question what the disability activities have added specifically to the organisation the section chair answers that:

The pleasure of taking part in sport regardless of the level has definitely caught on among the other members. The understanding for individuals with intellectual disabilities has increased within the club at large – and hence in the local community as well.

The elite activities within AC Springhill may be characterised as rather widely scattered geographically with training groups for different sports spread all over the city and the surrounding municipalities. Nevertheless, the “Springhill spirit”, which stands for a strong sense of solidarity, seems to permeate its regular meetings in training, competition and social contexts.

Among the elected representatives on the board it is evident how important the recruitment of new members is and how much work is devoted to this. Club representatives arrange school competitions and summer sport schools. Besides, AC Springhill runs the field days and teaches Health in a couple of schools. The club is also frequently invited to other clubs as well as local companies to talk about the value of sound living and voluntary commitment.

Rawley FC (3)

The expressed aim of Rawley FC is to arrange football and floorball activities for children and young people in the neighbourhood as well as recreational gymnastics activities for the elderly. Other explicit ambitions include offering a meeting place for the villagers where they may be active in their leisure time. The impression is that Rawley FC is the concern of the whole village. A great many villagers have some connection or other with the club. The club's goal is that its activities should attract as many people as possible regardless of their financial circumstances or sport ambitions. No special target group is given priority, according to the club manager, but the endeavour is still to put extra resources on leaders for members between 13 and 16, in the hope of getting more of them to stay on longer. Besides, one person is temporarily employed in a project aiming at engaging the young in administrative jobs and as operative leaders.

This widespread consensus about aims and goals is said to be the outcome of working with the club policy. One guiding principle is that no teams must be "topped". This principle also applies in external communication with the effect that children and parents with elite ambitions turn to other clubs. Another message communicated by the respondents is that the club is willing to receive children and young people who wish to try out a sport and that no fees are charged until the presumptive athletes have made up their minds to stay.

Parents of the children and youth who do sport are said to be the categories with the strongest interest in Rawley FC. They also largely constitute the club's leader team. Another interested party referred to is the wholly club-owned arena company. By being owners of the indoor arena the company controls all access to sport facilities. The club's facilities can also be rented out to the municipality and via this to the neighbouring school. This makes the municipality into another interested party. The rent agreement has also led to Rawley FC taking

on the task of arranging and providing leaders to after-school activities. The leaders are also in charge of students with floorball as their “eligible subject”.

Structural elements and organisational processes (2)

AC Springhill

The organisation of AC Springhill consists of a board of directors, areas of responsibility, sections and work committees. The board comprises 15 members divided into areas of responsibility: Economy & Administration, Market & Sponsoring; Operation & Arrangements, and Coach Team and Leader Team. The activity-directed sections, which have their own boards but joint work areas, include: Athletics, Cycling, Disability Sport and 4H (with general youth activities and youth culture). All leaders except the three paid head coaches are voluntary workers.

One important principle within AC Springhill is that the coaches should both learn from and supplement one another. The coach teams consist mainly of secondary-school youngsters, active or formerly active athletes who lead various activities under the supervision of the head coaches. The aim is that the teams should include different competencies. The club has adopted a method on using its coaches “in a way that benefits both club and community”, in the words of the club chair. The head coach shares his employment between the club and one local Upper Secondary, where the head coach is in charge of the eligible special sport class. The other two paid coaches are hired out to another upper secondary sport school.

Another highly valued principle in the club is to strive towards continual improvement, which is to be attained via a flexible organisation and a creative staff. One expression of this is said to be the generation shift on the board. For about ten years now half of the board has consisted of members in their

twenties, and women constitute 50 per cent of the board. The club chair refers to this associative democracy as an absolute necessity for the continued development of AC Springhill.

The internal work with rules and routines is characterised by an open and tentative approach with the focus on participation. The club has chosen to work in a non-hierarchic manner with few guidelines from the board. An overarching policy document for the whole club is produced every three years. On top of that, most of the everyday work takes place in sections and work committees with tasks and responsibilities distributed among a number of members. There are no job descriptions and only a few formal positions in the club. The treasurer explains in the interview that this is indirectly due to the initiator and the form of activity. The system is built on a substantial element of freedom, experience and a continuously on-going dialogue. This dialogue is described by the respondents in terms of AC Springhill's unusually high number of policy discussions.

“Values cannot be set down in writing, because this makes people lose their interest and commitment”, in the words of the treasurer. Instead frameworks in the form of rules, budgets and policies are preferred, within which those who are active in the club are completely free to create activities and formulate projects of their own.

The board comprises members from all sections. New items and initiatives are turned into tasks which are delegated to the sections or work committees within one of the intersectional working areas. Issues that are considered especially important by the annual meeting are focused on in workshops a couple of times every year.

When the club chair describes the above-mentioned meetings, trying to explain why AC Springhill seems to combine elite and club sport in a way that is

appreciated by everyone concerned, the club chair refers to the member consensus about the basic ideology. In addition, there is no mixing of economies between the groups, since the elite athletes have their own sponsors. It is true that the club as a whole assigns a certain sum of money to the elite athletes, which is distributed according to an internal scoring system, but the amount is relatively small and a dialogue about this is always kept open with the other member groups. A further explanation that the broad and elite activities function so well side by side, according to the chair, is that the elite take part in club activities like everyone else. This is extremely important, the club chair says: “If the distance grows too large between different member groups the confidence in the management and the mutual trust among members will decrease.” One important link between elite and broad sports consists of the head coaches, who not only take care of the elite but also coach the youth leaders, who are in charge of broad sports activities.

The training philosophy seems to be the same among all the AC Springhill coaches, regardless of age, education and responsibility. What permeates the activities is that everyone who wants to should be given the chance to develop. According to all the respondents, this is best achieved by avoiding divisions of various kinds as far as possible. For this reason girls and boys train together, and male and female leaders coach male and female members to about the same extent. Besides, once every week all athletes train together to associate and learn to know one another better, but also to encourage each other and develop in their different sports. In order to support the common identity they also travel together to at least one major competition every year.

Rawley FC (3)

Rawley FC consists of three sections: football, floorball and recreational sport. The club’s management is traditionally organised with annual meetings, board

and office (with an office employee on half time and one fixed-term full-time employee). The club's independent Arena Company has its own board, CEO and a full-time caretaker. The sections, which have their own boards and about seventy leaders in all, are completely independent with regard to activity framework and direction. They are also responsible for their own budgets. According to the respondents engaged in the football and floorball section, the club board is not involved in section activities as long as they function and keep to their budget. The only intersectional cooperation has to do with the distribution of training hours and a few other joint commitments.

Within Rawley FC the same principles apply to all core activities. The underlying assumption is that it is the parents of the children in each new cohort who are responsible for starting new teams. The volunteer youth leader explains:

If none of the parents step up and take responsibility for gathering the other parents with kids in that age group and make an inventory of the interest among the kids for playing floor ball, the consequence might very well be that no new team is started that year.

It is the responsibility of the parent collective to find out whether there is enough basis in the cohort to start a new team. They also appoint head and assistant coaches, team leaders and two team parents. In most cases both girls and boys take part in the same activities in the first year or two. Only when they start playing in leagues, which usually happens when the participants turn eight, is the group split according to sex. The club and its sections do not recommend league games before the age of eight. Still, it is a matter for each team to decide.

Every team is responsible for its own costs and revenues. The teams are also in charge of reports of attendance and the bookkeeping of municipal and state activity support. The team can attract financial support either by engaging

sponsors or by performing certain tasks within and without the club. At the same time it has to defray all costs like referee fees, travel expenses etc. The training fee paid by each participant goes into the team funds, while the membership fee is used for covering the club's overarching costs.

Everyday activities are controlled by the overarching work on policy, which was conducted by the club's policy ombudsman a couple of years ago and is manifested in a 47-page document. This document regulates the job descriptions of all functions as well as the descriptions of the functions in all units. Further, members' rights and obligations are clearly stipulated in the club statutes. In addition, each team makes its own agreements. The common goal is to involve as many parents as possible so as to spread responsibility and tasks in the hope of not causing any individual burnout.

Rawley FC's internal communication takes place primarily via the joint website, the separate section websites and the separate team websites. With the primary purpose of creating consensus throughout the club on the agreements made jointly, intersectional leader meetings are arranged. The sections in turn organise leader meetings with more sports-specific contents. Apart from these the club has an annual meeting, recurrent member and monthly board meetings, while the sections themselves organise section board meetings, and the teams have regular team and parent meetings. The attendance is generally good, as indicated by the respondents' answers. Major decisions on facility utilisation and budgets are made by the club and section boards, while practically all decisions that immediately concern sporting activities are taken by coaches and team leaders.

One important asset for Rawley FC is their indoor arena. The establishment of this facility forms an important symbol of club solidarity and the link to the village. The hall has also enabled the village seniors to arrange recreational

activities organised by the recreation section. The greatest club asset, according to the respondents, though, is all the leaders who are engaged as board members, coaches and team leaders. The commitment is great, but the feeling persists that there are never enough leaders for solving all the tasks. A distinct element in the strategies for engaging more leaders is that the establishment of new teams is conditioned by parent commitment. Unless a sufficient number of parents commit themselves, there will be no team. The key, as expressed by one of the coaches, is to make demands on parents at an early stage and to clarify what obligations attend membership in the club. Another clear strategy developed by the club to offset the shortage of leaders is to engage the members in minor time-limited projects instead of trying to tie them to more comprehensive positions.

Criteria of effectiveness (2)

AC Springhill (3)

To the coaches of AC Springhill success is to “exceed expectations”. According to the board members, medals are certainly a sign of success, but it is even more important to manage to come back from poor results. They also underline that results in the club context mean much more than good competition positions. According to the treasurer, the crucial point is that people like what the club does, which may be noticed in the thickness of the annual report and the member register and the size of financial grants. For the chair the most important issue is that the internal discussion of different concepts of success goes on continually.

Rawley FC (3)

All the interviewed representatives agree that the successes of Rawley FC are only marginally linked to how well the teams perform on the arena. What counts is instead having a sizeable membership and few people that quit. The latter

aspect is followed up annually to keep track of what are people's reasons for quitting. The activity leader explains:

At the end of each season we make records together with each team's coaches of those, if any, who have left the club. Then we make contact with each and every one and discuss the reasons for them leaving.

The common impression is that there are few who cease being members for the reasons that are usually claimed to be the big problems of club sport. The case is rather that families move out and join some other club closer to where they live, or that an athlete has higher sport ambitions than Rawley FC.

Good sport environments– discussion and conclusions (1)

AC Springhill and Rawley FC face similar dilemmas and struggle with the same problems as many other clubs in today's Sweden. The feature that draws our attention is not so much that they grapple with these difficulties, but the ways this is done.

Interestingly enough there are many similarities between the two selected clubs, even though they are placed in different geographical contexts. Previous research has, as we have mentioned before, indicated differences between clubs based in major municipality centres and clubs based in surrounding rural districts – but our study seems to show examples of clubs that seems to have succeeded in embracing the best of both worlds. The city-based club acts as a rural club when it comes to networking and socialising, while the rural club acts as an urban club when it comes to strategies for recruiting members and resources.

The analyses in this study show that a key to working with many of the problems experienced by the club is expansion. To continually keep expanding is apparently both a goal and a means. As a goal in terms of ascertaining the long-term survival of the club, with the idea that a big organisation has a greater chance to survive in the long run than a small one, and as a means in terms of the expectations on a big club to be better at answering to the needs expressed by members and external interested parties. The thought model seems to build on the notion that a big club can muster more and bigger resources and that these can be used for marketing measures like engaging the club in non-sporting activities and sheer recruitment activities. The motivation behind the efforts of both types is that they will generate more members and, in the long run, even more resources. Since the very size is looked upon as a key to making a greater local impact, it is believed that the club will also attract attention from other spheres of society, which is important for building up the network that is supposed to play a crucial part in the hunt for new resources.

A great many of the discussions taking place in our clubs consequently turn around strategies for expansion. In the case of Rawley FC they concern the role of the indoor arena, for instance, as a symbol for the club's local commitment. This is considered important both for increasing membership and for drawing attention from sponsors. For AC Springhill it is the commitment to work training, to the intellectually disabled, and to school health projects which may symbolise the club's expansion strategies.

In what way are the ambitions and strategies for expansion an expression of the collective fundamental values of the sports clubs? With regard to club aims and goals, the motto of AC Springhill is revealing: "Feel well instead of winning at any cost – have fun in the club to achieve great solidarity". The non-sporting social commitment is central. In Rawley FC the social and societal pathos is not

as explicit but it still shines through the goal: “[...] to offer the population of Rawley a natural meeting place [...] without being limited by financial circumstances or sport ambitions”. These ambitions also stamp the way the clubs arrange their activities. In AC Springhill it is reflected in the way the club looks upon its coaches’ double roles – “for both club and community” – as club coaches and school teachers, as well as in the way the club organises the joint youth activity and youth culture areas.

The clubs’ internal result assessment is also in accordance with expansion ambitions and strategies. Success is hardly linked at all with sport results and table positions, but rather with membership size and few resignations, as in the case of Rawley FC, and with the volume of the annual report, the member register and the financial contributions on the part of AC Springhill.

Another key to problem solving seems to read decentralisation. Even here the key has the double function of goals and means. As goals in the feeling that authority decentralisation leads to greater solidarity and commitment among members, which is supposed in the long run to guarantee the vitality of a club with a capacity to safeguard its survival. As means in terms of decentralised responsibility for, e.g., the recruitment of members, the provision of leaders and of resources, which is felt to achieve better results than when responsibility is centralised to board and main administration. A great many of the processes we have studied focus on decentralisation strategies. For AC Springhill they involve keeping the different sections’ economies separate and distributing tasks widely among the members. For Rawley FC they are about giving the sections free disposal of their own activity frames and directions.

When breaking down authority and responsibility and linking these aspects to values, we found them expressed in Rawley FC’s explicit demands on parents

whose children are active in the club: Unless a sufficient number of parents commit themselves there will be no team for the children to play in.

Membership is conditioned, and so are its accompanying obligations. Another related principle involves that it is the parent collective that has the chief responsibility for everything from recruiting members and coaches to conducting and financing activities. In AC Springhill these principles of decentralisation are not as explicit but nevertheless indicate that members are completely free to create their own activities and formulate projects as long as they keep within the budget frames and policies of the club.

To summarise, our analyses have demonstrated how successful sports clubs that are generally appreciated by the sport movement as well as by the surrounding community work with society-related dilemmas and sport-specific problems. We have traced elements in sports club activities and environments which have promoted this work. By analysing these we have been able to describe the values on which these activities rest and, vice versa, the importance of the collective meaning created in the sports clubs for their activity principles.

One thing we have not been able to demonstrate more accurately is whether there exist elements in sports club activities and environments that are connected with their geographical location and activity focus; Rawley FC is a sport for all oriented, urban club whereas AC Springhill is more of a rural club with a complementary elite focus. This deficiency is a result of the limited selection in the study. Our results, though, seems to point at the opposite; i.e. that sport club activities (and goals) and environments are dependent variables while geographical location is an independent one. This may be taken as a hypothesis. In brief, more comparative research is required, involving studies with other selections than ours, to proceed further in this field.

We nevertheless hope that our contribution, in addition to constituting empirical material for comparison, may also form the starting point for further methodological efforts as well as a further theoretical understanding of collective meaning creation. This may be done through continued studies of fundamental values and their importance to activity principles and, in extension, to their potential for serving as good sport environments in Swedish club sport.

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