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Police Athletic Leagues for Law Enforcement

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Abstract

Police Athletics Teams are an excellent tool for Law Enforcement agencies.

These teams are valuable in so many areas for the departments and the officers who choose to participate. The health gains and professional development for the officers will allow them to better serve our communities. The departments enjoy the benefits in recruitment, retention, and public image from Police Athletic Teams. The benefits far outweigh any public misconceptions of how Police Athletics are an unnecessary drain on the department's budget and officers would be prone to Weekend Warrior injuries.

Healthy and athletic employees are less likely to have issues that contribute to the rising cost of health care. Police athletic teams will allow departments to recruit and retain the most desirable and highly sought after police officers. Competing in competitive sporting events will build pride and comradery amongst the officers. Athletic teams require very little money and mostly just require support and flexibility from the department. These athletic teams are an excellent public relations tool at a time when the media is full of negative stories about law enforcement. Law enforcement agencies should support competitive police athletic teams.

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INTRODUCTION

Law enforcement agencies should support competitive police athletic teams. Law enforcement agencies across the United States of America are currently struggling with the issues of recruitment, retention, and the image of police officers. Police athletic teams allow officers to build comradery and pride in their department all while enhancing their level of physical fitness. The law enforcement agency will have a great public relations tool by showcasing activities in the community and having officers at their highest level of physical fitness. Human beings are very diverse and respond differently to types of sports and exercise. There are multiple athletic teams and sports that allow an officer to find one that benefits their goals, commitment level, and genetic makeup. By publicizing their support of athletic teams, law enforcement agencies will recruit motivated and fitness conscious applicants. These agencies will also retain motivated and physically fit officers who have built bonds through police athletic teams.

Criticizing police budgets and the activities of police officers is very popular in today's culture and media. There are critics who would oppose any law enforcement agency's resources going towards athletics. However, the agency will gain returns on investments they make in police athletics.

Critics say police athletic teams will lead to Weekend Warrior injuries and will put additional strains on manpower (Roberts, 2014). Simple steps can be taken to eliminate or reduce the risk of injuries from participating in a police athletic team. The reward is well worth the minor risk an officer will become injured.

POSITION

Competitive police athletic teams allow police officers to build teamwork and comradery through their participation in sports. The athletic teams allow officers to get away from the job and compete together as a team. This creates a bond and sense of pride that is beneficial to the law enforcement agency and the officer's career. Studies in Continuing Education conducted research on "Police bodies and police minds: professional learning through bodily practices of sport participation" (Lindberg, Rantatalo, & Stenling, 2017, p.371). The study was conducted on police officers in Sweden who were members of The National Swedish Police Sport Association. The officers studied participated with different teams and competed in different sports. The study found "institutional bonds between the employer and athletic organizations occurs frequently in policing" (Lindberg et al., 2017, p. 376). The officers who participated were found to have benefited much more than the obvious boost to their physical fitness. The participating officers were found to be more self controlled, focused, able to handle stress, development oriented, connected, having a sense of belonging, and positive. The study showed "sports participation creates personal connections between individuals and groups who otherwise would not have met" and "allow information to flow across vertical and horizontal administrative boundaries and across staff categories" (Lindberg, 2017, p. 380). One officer reported he was able to get a different view of the highest ranking officer in his department after he played in his league a few times. The officers studied found "a sense of belonging in the continuing socialization of police work" and "sports provide a practice where individuals can move closer to central

notions of policing as sport enables one to develop abilities such as being fit for a purpose, disciplined and/or able bodied” (Lindberg, 2017, p. 383).

A study was conducted regarding how the hospitality industry could benefit from its employees participating in intramural sports. “Participants ranged from 23 to 43 years of age with an average of six years of hospitality experience” (Williams, 2018, p.9). The study found intramural sports made individuals more self-efficient. Self-efficacy led to better communication, confidence, critical thinking, and collaboration. The hospitality industry was interested in using intramural sports as a way for one to be introduced “to pressure-filled situations and fine tune their self-efficacy maturation” (Williams, 2018, p.3). The study found intramural sports as an excellent tool for hospitality employees to be quick and efficient problem solvers and to have the confidence to rely on their decision making skills.

The New York City Social Club was studied for its “unique opportunity for team building and relationship development” (Short, 2006, p.1). The NYCSC offers a relaxed adult coed recreational environment and offers such sports as dodgeball, kickball, touch football, and disk golf. “Companies seeking to enhance workforce relations can hold events for a variety of employee groupings” (Short, 2006, p.2) through the NYCSC. Companies reported receiving benefits such as “team building, employee health improvement, and workforce stability” (Short, 2006, p.2) through the NYCSC. The participants found the “opportunity to escape traditional office roles helps form cohesive bonds. Playing a sport together fosters loyalty among the team members and bonds them together in the pursuit of a common goal” (Short, 2006, p.2) through the NYCSC. The study also found benefits to the participant’s mental health which also led to better

“job performance, better interoffice relationships, and greater productivity” (Short, 2006, p.3). This was accomplished because physical exercise “can reduce the physiological and emotional symptoms of stress, relieving depression, increase energy, diffusing anger and aggression, improving the quality of sleep, and building stronger self-esteem” (Short, 2006, p.3). NYCSC events seem to be well received by everyone and are very appealing to newer recruits and employees. By hosting a social sport event, the company is able to show it can connect with the younger generation of employees and allow all employees to participate and feel inspired.

Law enforcement agencies are facing very difficult obstacles with recruiting and retention of officers. Police departments are at the mercy of their city or county elected government officials as to the amount of compensation allowed for salaries. Police athletic leagues are a way the law enforcement agencies can recruit and retain the right type of officer. A study by the National Police Foundation found “If an officer bonds with the agency and community, they are more likely to be effective and maintain employment” (Meade, 2016, p.2). The study suggested law enforcement agencies should “Recruit and select officers who identify and bond with the agency culture” (Meade, 2016, p.2). A law enforcement agency would benefit from creating a culture of physical fitness, team work, pride, and comradery with the help of participating in police athletic teams. This would allow the law enforcement agency to recruit and retain a more desirable and productive officer.

A study by The Police Journal on retention found “The spirit of teamwork and the benefit of working with a spirited group of like individuals” (Monk, 2010, p. 171) was reported by officers as a “positive job perception and satisfaction” (Monk, 2010, p. 171).

Many officers reported they like working with a group that was “motivated, proactive and working together” (Monk, 2010, p. 171). There was an overwhelming theme that officers better enjoyed their employment with a department if there was camaraderie and a team environment.

The study of the New York City Social Sport Club also found participating companies saw the benefit of staff retention. A benefit of planned sporting events with the NYCSC was “When trust is deepened and a sense of team inspiration is created, the overall work environment becomes healthier and more pleasant-one that employees are reluctant to leave prematurely” (Short, 2006, p.3).

Competing in a competitive athletic event with a colleague in front of spectators creates motivation for one “to hit the weights with a certain vigor that just doesn’t exist when one casually walks into a weight room for some exercise. Competing will give your training a sense of purpose” (Braun, 2018, p.2). The psychological benefits of competing will elevate an officer’s level of physical fitness to a higher level. Many people who wish to become as strong as they genetically and physically can will compete in a powerlifting meet. The meet will give the person the needed motivation to consistently train at an intense level, and the judges will give the person an honest appraisal of their true strength. Training without a goal or time line is quite stagnant. Competing against other determined police officers and having your physical abilities in the spotlight might not sound very appealing at first. However, “If you’re not consistently scared and uncomfortable, you’re not making progress. Period” (Robertson, 2011, p.7). An officer who wishes to take his strength to the next level should consider the advice of a highly sought after physical trainer to elite athletes: “If you need a competitive outlet or

need to get that fire back in your belly, a powerlifting meet may be the answer” (Robertson, 2011, p.6).

Police athletic teams have several different sports that rely on different types of fitness and abilities. This allows officers to find a sport they enjoy and their bodies respond to the exercise it receives from it. A study has shown “One size physical training (PT) programs do NOT fit all. One size fits one. Individuals will respond uniquely to physical training programs” (O’Malley, 2014, p.31). The variety of sports allows officers to find their niche and become competitive in it. This is a great tool to get a culture of fitness and a better image because “Friendly competition between coworkers can motivate officers to get moving” (Dekmar, 2018 p.6). This allows law enforcement agencies to not rely on ineffective and boring structured physical fitness group exercising and testing. The reality is it is better to focus on “vigorous intensity exercise and its ability to increase aerobic fitness more effectively than moderate intensity” (O’Malley, 2014, p.30). This is best achieved through competition among peers and not a monotonous group exercise.

Supporting police athletic teams is a good business practice for law enforcement agencies. It is financially smart to “argue that officer fitness falls within the parameters of resource management for an agency. Just as preventive maintenance performed on an agency’s fleet of cruisers” (Partee, 2018, p.37). The reality is police officers are like any other resource of the city or county. They are best if they are functioning properly, holding up the desired image, and will be around for a long period of time. The law enforcement agency will receive more community support and be seen in a favorable light if the community feels it has ownership in having the best and healthiest police

possible. This level of community pride can be achieved by “soliciting ideas, involving community fitness and health experts, establishing community police fitness challenges” (Partee, 2018, p.37). This type of culture in a law enforcement agency will “yield benefits of better police service and, eventually, a closer connection to the community” (Partee, 2018, p.37).

The Indio (California) Police Department has used police athletics as a community outreach tool. The Indio Police Department has participated in four community sporting events per year in the past five years. A favorite event in the community is the yearly Turkey Bowl. The Turkey Bowl is held close to Thanksgiving every year. Police officers play against teens in a spirited game of flag football. This has been an excellent tool for the Indio Police Department to keep an open line of communication with the city’s youth. The Turkey Bowl is an excellent public relations and community involvement event. This type of event is more successful than most public relations events in law enforcement that require several man hours to organize or a hefty price from a consultant (Washburn, 2017).

COUNTER ARGUMENTS

Some may argue competitive police athletic team will result in overtime and an increased premium to employee medical insurance or the city or county’s Workers Compensation insurance due to Weekend Warrior injuries. A Weekend Warrior is defined as someone who “engages in demanding recreational sporting activities on weekends despite minimal physical activity during the week” (Roberts, 2014, p.1). This concept is a legitimate concern “Because long periods of intense physical activity on weekends is physically demanding, especially among unfit individuals, weekend

warriors may be at an increased risk of injury” (Roberts, 2014, p.1). Data collected from medical facilities have reported a “significantly higher number of patients were injured as a result of physical activity or recreational sports on the weekend verses weekdays” (Roberts, 2014, p.4). A study reported the five most common Weekend Warrior injuries are “Achilles tendon ruptures, plantar fasciitis, ankle sprains, tennis elbow, and shin splints” (DeBusk, 2018 p.2).

Simple preparation and maintenance can prevent or greatly reduce the risk of Weekend Warrior injuries. Most injuries that are considered to fall in the category of Weekend Warrior are due to an individual being out of shape and obese trying to suddenly and vigorously compete in a physically competitive event. The best course of action is to challenge muscles during the week or when an individual is not competing, so the muscles are strong enough to withstand a grueling physical competition. For example, an individual that competes in a sport that is very taxing on the legs and lower body should consider exercising their lower body two times during the week or between competitive activities. By doing an exercise like squats, this will allow the person’s quadriceps and hamstrings to remain strong enough to compete in an athletic event without injury or excessive soreness. Overlooking stretching and warming up is another cause of Weekend Warrior injuries (DeBusk, 2018). Stretching and warm ups prior to engaging in vigorous physical activity can be used “both to increase flexibility and improve blood flow to the muscles about to be used as this can help reduce injury risk” (DeBusk, 2018 p.4). A proper diet is another area that can prevent injuries. Giving a body what it needs through a balance diet will allow an individual to sustain through physically demanding competition or an athletic event. Getting protein from lean meats

or eggs, carbohydrates from fruits, vegetables and whole grains, and fats from whole foods will allow a body to function at its highest level and thrive during competitive athletics. (DeBusk, 2018).

The Journal for American Medicine conducted a study “To investigate associations between the weekend warrior and other physical activity patterns and the risks for all-cause, cardiovascular disease (CVD), and cancer mortality” (O’Donovan, 2018, p.335). The study was conducted to compare individuals that participated in leisure time physical activity and their mortality rate. The most interesting data was “1 or 2 sessions per week of moderate or vigorous-intensity leisure time physical activity was sufficient to reduce all-cause, CVD, and cancer mortality risks” (O’Donovan, 2018, p.340). The study found the “Weekend Warrior” style of fitness was enough physical activity to reduce the risk of a heart attack or cancer. This is valuable information for police officers and law enforcement agencies. Police officers often become complacent and sedentary, especially after several years on the job. Research has shown “Statistically speaking, a police officer is 25 times more likely to die from cardiovascular disease than from action in the field” (Wahome, 2017, p.12).

Some critics believe competitive police athletic teams are a waste city or county resources. Critics believe police budgets are already too big and are not comfortable with officers being responsible for more roles that go beyond directly protecting a community. The public sometimes feels the police are disconnected from the public they serve when they see their police force using military style equipment to combat drug cartels, gangs, and terrorism. A study from the Justice Policy Institute found “Since 1982, total criminal justice spending increased 535 percent: total spending on police

increased 445 percent” and “While states and localities are increasingly looking for more effective ways to use scarce funds, criminal justice continues to consume a large percentage of the budget” (Ashton, 2012, p.11). This causes citizens and elected officials to be very critical of police budgets. Something not considered a traditional role of a police officer, becomes highly scrutinized and may be deemed a waste of resources that are already limited.

Police accountability is a hot topic with certain politicians and media outlets. Some people feel the police are out of control when it comes to use of force situations, and there is not justice for officers who do not follow department policy or violate citizen's rights with excessive force. These critics feel any additional funds should “include steps toward improving police oversight, such as by purchasing body cameras or hiring more officers for internal affairs divisions” (Neuhauser, 2017, p.4). Stephen Rushin a Law professor for the Loyola University Chicago of Law stated “Police accountability is expensive, and if you're going to be serious about police oversight, you've got to be willing to invest significant amounts of money, and that's often going to take away from other worthy causes” (Neuhauser, 2017, p.4). These critics are very skeptical of any extra resources of a police department going toward anything other than police accountability.

Police accountability and being financially responsible are serious issues that need to be addressed. However, the small amount of time and money it takes for starting a competitive police athletic team will provide a great return and be well worth the investment. A study has shown “In a physical and mentally demanding occupation such as law enforcement, fitness is highly related to career success and safety” and

“the calculated cost of a heart attack during service is approximately \$400,000 to \$700,000” (DeNysschen, 2018, p.67). Having physically fit officers is a necessity and is a financially good business decision.

Recruiting and retention of qualified police officers has become an extreme strain on departments trying to staff positions because police officers are being called upon to handle more nontraditional law enforcement roles and “(1) an increase in attrition caused by the retirement of baby boomers; (2) a diminishing applicant pool due to competition from other organizations” (Northup, 2018, p.20). The city of Seattle, Washington spends an average of \$200,000 every year on strictly recruiting police officers. A study considered “the cost to recruit, hire, and train one officer is a minimum, \$100,000, small allowances allocated to recognition and policy changes to give employees the feeling of job enrichment are paltry in comparison” (Northup, 2018, p.24). The cost of implementing a competitive police athletic team is very minimal. The biggest obstacle will be department leaders recognizing the benefit and necessity. Officers will mostly require the law enforcement agency’s support, as well as, allowing officers to flex their schedules. A simple but effective fitness room can be set up in a department starting at \$3,500 (Wahome, 2017).

RECOMMENDATION

Leaders in law enforcement agencies should be educated on the benefits they will receive in supporting competitive police athletic teams in their departments. The Texas Police Athletic Federation’s website (texaspolicegames.org) is a good start. They have 44 events for competitors to choose from. Leaders need to think about what type of culture and atmosphere they want to have in their department. By supporting

competitive athletic teams, they will be better suited to recruit and retain more desirable officers who are motivated, physically fit, and proud to work for their department. This will provide the community with a higher quality of police services. Cost and scheduling issues are minimal. The benefit to moral and over all health of the officers is monumental. Most departments probably already have an officer that participates in an athletic league or has knowledge of a sport. These officers would be valuable tools in starting a competitive athletic team if properly motivated by the department's leaders. Any concerns with budget issues can easily be addressed. The department can seek assistance from businesses and wealthy residents if needed. Police athletic teams are a good public relations source for potential donators. The risk of injury to officers should not prevent a law enforcement agency from participating in competitive police athletic events. The risk can be greatly reduced if proper preparation and body maintenance is followed. The benefit to the officer's cardio vascular health far outweighs the small risk of a muscle strain or sprain.

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