

## SELLING AMATEUR SPORT

### Business Executive Delivers a Powerful Challenge to Canada's Sport Leaders

#### GEORGE HELLER

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*Heller was president and CEO of the Victoria Commonwealth Games from 1991 to 1994 and was awarded the Meritorious Service Medal and Citation by the Government of Canada in recognition of his leadership of the Games and his service to Canada.*

Although I have been a passionate supporter of amateur sport in Canada for many years, I do not consider myself an expert on the subject. I do, however, have strong opinions based on my involvement in sport and my background in organization and strategy.

My initiation began when I was asked to put the 1994 Commonwealth Games in Victoria, B.C., on a solid footing less than three years before the Opening Ceremony. The organizing committee had lost its way and panic was in the air. It was clear to me that the missing elements and the root cause of the problem was lack of strategy, organization, and execution. In short, the problem was not sport; it was delivering sport.

As we successfully worked through the issues, two key learnings emerged. First, the athletes are a superior life form who embody all the values I believe in. Second, amateur sport is a tightly controlled club of sport types who either don't want outsiders involved or don't know how to enrol people from outside. I found sport to be too inbred and lacking certain essential skills to the detriment of the athletes and the cause of amateur sport. Amateur sport is long on passion, short on vision, and adversarial in all its dealings. The singular focus and extreme competitiveness required to be a successful athlete has migrated to sport administrators.

This is perhaps a harsh indictment, but the fact remains that amateur sport in Canada has not succeeded in winning either its fair share of mind or wallet, and to do so is critical to its success. The question is why and what can be done about it or, more correctly, what each of Canada's sport leaders can do to improve the current situation.

Drawing on my business background, I am addressing the machinery of sport rather than sport itself. I begin by providing a baseline of how business is organized and suggest that this model be contrasted against the various sport models.

#### **Self-interest versus the Common good**

Business is a collaboration of various people and skills to achieve a common objective that is measurable and articulated to all. Essentially, business is a horizontal endeavour with each unit in the company moving in lock step to achieve the agreed to or mandated common goal.

Amateur sport, in my observation, is a vertical endeavour with every sport, every event, and every participant focused on narrow self-interest at the expense of the greater good. The result is a negative impact on the ability of sport to achieve beyond the vertical channel so that it is seen as more than its component parts and captures the imagination of the public-at-large and the private and public sectors.

### **Segmentation and Customer Targetting**

A business strives to build and deliver products and services to a defined customer segment. We sell customers bibles rather than trying to change their religion. Ask 10 people on the street for their definition of amateur sport and you will likely get 11 different answers. Amateur sport must, in unison, de-confuse the various publics about the significant differences between amateur sport for recreation – which is about involvement – and high performance sport – which is about international competition and winning medals for our country.

The three customer segments of amateur sport – the public, governments, and the private sector – have different expectations and will potentially support both recreation and high performance if customer expectations and needs are met in each. When making presentations, combining the two categories, or more correctly, failing to segment the two, has worked against sport. Each is a noble cause, but each provides different benefits that need to be defined. Know what you are selling and to whom. Trying to sell lawn mowers to apartment dwellers is a career-limiting moved. Similarly, selling the benefits of improved medal counts to a customer focused on community involvement is as bad as selling the benefits of youth involvement in sport to a customer focused on high performance.

### **Product and Market**

Business strives to match demand with products and services, using advertising to convince the consumer that we have what they want. The messaging is concise and focused and the benefits are clearly spelled out.

Amateur sport needs to clarify and quantify the benefits of its products and then match the consumer and the product. All three of sport's customer segments are potential buyers of both products although at different times and for different needs. It is essential to know amateur sport's customers and their hot buttons in order to sell the product.

### **Competition versus Collaboration**

Business strives to achieve excellence in each of its units. To be successful individually, the units compete for resources, brownie points, and influence. The leader of each unit, however, has a further responsibility and that is to the total enterprise. The responsibility of senior management is to ensure that unit excellence is not achieved at the expense of enterprise excellence. It is this collaboration that ensures success. Each unit, irrespective of how competitive they may be, understands that it cannot be successful unless the entire enterprise is. A canoe does not sink on only one side; every person in it gets wet, thus each is responsible for the health of the whole.

I don't think amateur sport has learned this important lesson. It is all vertical with no organization or process to manage the totality. The lack of a horizontal perspective is the single largest detriment to getting amateur sport to the next level in Canada. Regrettably, the biggest losers are the athletes for they are truly horizontal; they progress sequentially in ability yet their support systems are vertical. Athletes need a seamless system of support to achieve their potential and I submit that the real "product" is the athlete, whether recreational or high performance. In business, anything that inhibits the product must be changed; we live or die by the desirability of our product.

To summarize my point, in high performance sport, the product is the medals Canada's athletes bring home. Each sport, each sporting event, and each sport organization must have dual responsibility, one to itself and its athletes and the other to the enterprise that is amateur sport in Canada.

## **Leadership**

Ultimately, sport leaders are in the people business. Effective leadership and effective leaders are the game breakers in any enterprise. Leaders must have a vision of where to take the organization. They must have a solid grasp of the critical success factors that make the enterprise win. And they have to be able to communicate that vision to all of the people involved, explaining how they individually contribute to the overall success of the enterprise. Leaders lead, managers manage – there is a difference. Leaders are decisive, forthright, honest, and make tough choices. They understand the difference between letting everyone have their say and trying to cater to everyone.

Leadership in sport is no different. If there is a lack of leadership, it is not at the unit level, it is at the enterprise level. The sheer number of sport organizations is mind-boggling. Sport leaders must be encouraged to find common ground, to do away with duplication, to re-allocate resources to the product and product development, to create a strategy for the sport enterprise in Canada, and to create the vision that all Canadians can buy into.

## **The Opportunity**

There are no more motivated or dedicated people in Canada than our sport leaders. To help them succeed, I encourage them to enlist non-sport expertise and draw on their different perspectives and skills.

Dream big! If Australia could engage its entire population, so can Canada through a combination of strategy and excellent communication.

The 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympic Games are greatly assisting in growing the backing for amateur sport. Both the public and private sectors are increasing their support. Our company alone has pledged \$20 million over seven years and there are more like us out there than ever before. The ongoing key will be the athletes and coaches getting out to meet the public to make amateur sport real and personal, telling their stories, building the pride, selling the benefits.

I have learned a lot over the years from amateur sport, lessons I use in business and in life. Sport has taught me values and purpose, dedication, and selflessness. Ultimately, coaching in sport and coaching in life is very similar. Sport leaders, in particular coaches, occupy a special place in the sport system by virtue of influencing both athletes and administrators, a rock solid place from which to exert leadership.

I am personally very encouraged. I finally see momentum building, awareness growing, and support forthcoming. It has been a long wait. I urge Canada's sport leaders to understand that they need an ongoing relationship with their customer segments and to not take them for granted. Learn to invest time wisely with customers. We in our business can quantify the lifetime value of our customers. That is the long game, one that demands they be served well every time, letting them know that we appreciate their patronage, tailoring our reward systems to acknowledge the best of them, which are those who transact often over a longer term. Never forget that they are a customer of your product, keep improving it, keep evolving it, and let the customers share in the excitement.

If some of my observations seem harsh and some suggestions less than helpful, they are made with deep respect for what has been achieved and a personal wish to see amateur sport in Canada thrive and grow.

*Mr. Heller's comments were made at the request of the Coaching Association of Canada, reflecting the organization's commitment to encouraging frank and open dialogue between Canada's sport community, its funding partners, all levels of government, and the public at large.*

