

Sport as Prevention? Minneapolis' Experiment with Late-Night Basketball

by Douglas Hartmann and Darren Wheelock

A transformation has occurred in youth sport and recreation provision in urban areas since the 1990s. From small experimental programs to citywide summer projects, prison boot camps, and federally funded public-private partnerships, sport- and recreation-based programs have become popular tools for risk prevention and social intervention for young urban men and women of color in recent years. Reliable national numbers are difficult to come by, but in the Twin Cities alone during the summer of 2001, there were at least 150 such programs and initiatives serving tens of thousands of young people. Experts have referred to this as sport's "social problems industry." Yet as widespread and wide ranging as this industry has become, very little is known about the programs that compose it. Why are they so popular? How are they supposed to work? Are they at all effective?

No one, it seems, has any real answers to these questions. Even for the most famous of all such programs—popularly known as midnight basketball leagues—the information is anecdotal or from uncritical journalistic reports. We became convinced that if we were to understand the opportunities for risk prevention that such sport-based programs present, we needed to know more about how these programs actually work. It was this desire that led us to our involvement with a Twin Cities variation on the late-night basketball theme called the Stay Alive program.

This article's primary focus is on the lessons we learned from the Stay Alive program, and how these lessons can inform other programs purporting to use sport as a tool for prevention. We provide an overview of the Stay Alive program, explain various theories of sport as prevention that underlie such programs, identify some of the implementation problems experienced by Stay Alive organizers, and offer some key findings about the program that can be used as building blocks for future programs. Throughout the article, we attempt to highlight the inherent tensions between



Photo by StudioTobechi

The Stay Alive program was a partnership of the Ghetto Basketball Association (GBA) and Shoot Hoops, Not Guns. Pictured here are GBA cofounders Derek Reuben (left) and Ralph Crowder, two local organizers of the Stay Alive program.

the demands of a sport-based program and the requirements of its preventionist rationale.

Minneapolis' Stay Alive Program

Initiated by the Minneapolis Department of Health and Family Support (DHFS) during the summer of 1998, the Stay Alive program actually consisted of two different grassroots basketball-based programs: the Ghetto Basketball Association (GBA) and the Shoot Hoops, Not Guns project of the Twin Cities Healthy Nations organization. For the better part of the year, these two community-based programs had operated a variety of sport- and recreation-based activities on an independent basis for disadvantaged African American and Native American youth in the Powderhorn Park, Phillips, and Near North neighborhoods. During the summer, with funding and support from the DHFS's Youth Violence Prevention Project (YVPP), they partnered to sponsor basketball leagues that operated between 7 and 11 PM.

The YVPP itself was a larger initiative undertaken by former Mayor Sharon Sayles Belton in 1996 in response to the exceptionally high rate of homicides that plagued the city in 1995. During its first two years of programming, the YVPP used its \$100,000 budget to give small grants to a variety of community-based violence prevention initiatives. These programs ranged from the development of a domestic violence prevention curriculum and a pilot test of peer courts in middle schools to a gun buy-back program and a handful of different counseling and educational programs. In 1998, the department decided to concentrate its resources on the one activity that was successful in bringing in low-income, 18- to 25-year-old men of color: basketball. Thus, the Stay Alive program was born.

We got involved with Stay Alive in the fall of 1998 following its initial summer run. After having seen a story in a local newspaper, we contacted the director of the program and he invited us to several of the wrap-up and planning

meetings. Once we got to know various program administrators and grassroots organizers, we wrote a proposal to the CURA asking for assistance in funding a research and planning partnership. When our proposal was approved, we began working in partnership with the Stay Alive program on program development, design, and evaluation, and in return had the opportunity to conduct intensive ethnographic and interview-based research on the program.

Visions of Sport as Prevention

One of the most basic questions we wanted to answer by entering into the world of late-night basketball—“the field” as ethnographers call it—was why this initiative was such a popular idea in the first place. What made program supporters and organizers so confident that having young men run around in short pants would impact their lives or the problems in their communities? Part of the answer was simple pragmatics: late-night sports was, for both city officials and grassroots organizers alike, a relatively high-profile and inexpensive program in a community where little funding and few other options were available. Even if it did nothing else, a basketball-based program reached out to an otherwise difficult-to-reach population.

But funding and public support were only part of the story. Almost everyone involved with the program was convinced that a basketball-based program constituted a uniquely promising and appealing form of prevention. They believed, in short, that late-night basketball could actually reduce crime, violence, and risk in these communities. Although these notions were rarely thought out, much less informed by scholarly research and writing, we were able to discern at least four different explanations among program supporters concerning how and why basketball contributes to prevention.

The first explanation, what we will call the *sport-as-character-building model*, assumes that sport is an activity that builds character, self-discipline, and self-esteem among its participants. This model of sport assumes that the very act of athletic participation cultivates the virtues of hard work and playing by the rules thought to be lacking among many young, inner-city men of color. A second explanation, the *sport-as-mobility model*, views sport as a more tangible and direct vehicle for social incorporation and mobility. This model focuses primarily on the educational opportunities afforded by athletic scholarships, but also involves

Figure 1. Models of Sport as Prevention

	Idealist orientations (sport participation as positive social force)	Instrumentalist orientations (sport participation as tool)
Discipline-based models	Sport as character building	Sport as social control <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • surveillance • resocialization
Pathway/resource-based models	Sport as mobility	Sport as “hook”

more direct occupational and financial rewards provided through coaching, officiating, or program supervision. A third explanation, the *sport-as-social-control model*, emphasizes discipline and surveillance. This model assumes that sport contributes to prevention by keeping young men off the streets during high-crime hours and providing them (through counseling and mentoring) with new role models and moral codes. Finally, the *sport-as-hook model* views sport as a tool to connect young men with educational and employment opportunities. In this vision, sport is actually deemphasized in favor of the more conventional prevention-oriented aspects of the program.

These four visions, derived primarily from either personal experience or anecdotal evidence, differed both in their common sense perceptions of the problems of urban young men and in their views of the positive potential of sport, as shown in Figure 1. The character-building and social control models focused on the moral deficiencies of the young men, whereas the mobility and hook models emphasized the social context and the lack of opportunities available to young men growing up in such environments. In terms of visions of sport, the character-building and mobility models are based on the belief that participation in sports automatically serves as a form of social prevention, whereas the control and hook approaches hold that participation has to be directed in a more instrumental and strategic fashion for prevention benefits to be realized.

We should make it clear that we did not consider all of these models equally plausible or compelling. We were particularly skeptical of the visions that held that sport was automatically and inevitably a positive force for prevention. Our skepticism was based on the fact that at least three decades of scholarly research has produced little evidence to support this proposition. Instead, studies have

suggested that the effectiveness of recreation-based prevention initiatives depends upon who runs such programs, what objectives they are directed toward, and how they work in combination with other programming. Ultimately, we were invited to participate in the program to help figure out how to integrate and balance these various approaches to sport as prevention.

Implementation Issues

When we initially entered this collaborative effort, we hoped to be able to systematically assess the effectiveness of sport-based prevention programs and possibly test some of the different theories of sport as prevention. Despite our grand intentions, we were unable to document the success or failure of this program in meeting its prevention goals. The reasons for this are complicated, but essentially we discovered that the daily demands of running a grassroots community-based program often conflict with the long-term demands of program evaluation and scholarly research. Basic data collection was partially to blame. But even had we been able to gather sufficient data, we are not convinced they would have demonstrated sport’s utility as prevention. We say this because the various program elements that were most focused on prevention turned out to be among the most poorly planned and organized aspects of the entire initiative. Nowhere was this problem more acute than in the life skills training that program organizers adopted as the centerpiece of their prevention strategy.

The initial goals and objectives of the life skills program were broad and ambitious. Program planners decided to sponsor a series of informational talks and motivational seminars presented by various (mostly African American) community leaders. The idea was to provide young men with concrete information about problems they faced and new ways of thinking about these prob-

lems, as well as to expose them to positive male role models. Based upon our suggestions, these activities were to be integrated into the daily routine of the program and were to occur 5–10 minutes immediately before each game and then again during the halftime break. The series was to be developed and conducted by a local community activist organization known as Men of SALAAM (Sincere and Loyal African American Men), which also provided security for the Stay Alive program. This organization designed a curriculum that focused on nine virtues, one for each week of the program, and located speakers who were asked to address a particular social value or virtue such as responsibility, perseverance, or loyalty. In addition, all program staff—coaches, referees, site security, and so on—were to stress these virtues throughout the course of each session.

We had reservations about the life skills curriculum from the beginning. We had hoped to see more extensive programming, specifically programming oriented toward expanding the educational and employment opportunities available to these young men. But whatever reservations we may have had, the life skills concept was never given a fair test. The curriculum was loosely conceived and poorly organized. Only one training session was held, and less than half of the core staff were in attendance. Consequently, staff had little understanding of the virtues that were to be presented or their specific roles in relaying these virtues to program participants. Referees, the most consistent and single most visible program officials on site, were not involved in the training at all, and the Shoot Hoops branch of the program opted out of the life skills program entirely.

The speakers and presentations themselves were surprisingly unprofessional and inconsistent and often consisted of little more than a group prayer or pep talk before the game. Sometimes they were dropped altogether. During the course of the 67 games we or our research assistants attended, we observed some 89 life skills presentations, well short of the 134 that should have occurred if the program had been conducted according to plan. Although this component of the Stay Alive program was supposed to occupy a minimum of 10 minutes per game, 76 of the 89 presentations we observed (or 85%) lasted 1 minute or less. Indeed, on only three occasions did the life skills presentations meet the minimum time requirement of 5 minutes

that was collectively agreed upon prior to the beginning of the season, and two of those presentations came on the opening night of the program.

Similar problems plagued the other nonbasketball aspects of the program. The original plan was for Stay Alive to sponsor an educational fair and a job fair on two Saturdays during the course of the summer. The events were intended to bring representatives from various educational institutions, job training organizations, and employee recruitment firms into contact with program participants, their friends and family, and other members of the community. These events were to include music, food, and other festivities, and Stay Alive teams would play unofficial exhibition games and be encouraged to bring along friends and family. Both of these events fell far short of expectations. The job fair never happened, and although the education fair did take place, only three local schools sent representatives, much to the disappointment and frustration of those in attendance.

Those elements of the program that administrators deemed of paramount importance to its prevention goals were precisely its weakest components as a result of a variety of factors and failings—a recurring source of frustration and dissent among program organizers. Part of the problem can be traced back to the philosophical differences about sport that various organizers and officials brought to the program. Those who thought that basketball itself was enough for social intervention were not enamored with the idea of putting time and energy into activities they believed were not essential.

Practical problems were probably even more important. From the very beginning, the program faced constant staffing problems. We observed a full staff in place (defined as a site coordinator, time keeper, score keeper, two referees, security from Men of SALAAM, and a director who made a stop-in visit) on only 5 of the 31 program days we were on site. In the course of the day-to-day struggles of making the program happen, it was invariably and consistently the nonbasketball aspects of the program that were sacrificed. Even those program administrators most committed to the various life skills and educational components of the program (and, conversely, least interested in basketball itself) found themselves making these kinds of practical choices time and again.

The poor administration and implementation of the prevention components

of the Stay Alive program stand in marked contrast to the league play itself. One of the program's most obvious successes was as a basketball league. There was consistent and enthusiastic participation on the part of the players, and the quality of play was actually quite high, which accounted for the regular attendance by both players and local community members. Several of the games were played in front of audiences in excess of one hundred people.

This highlights for us the deep and fundamental tension that all sport and recreation initiatives face: on one hand, the primary rationale for the program has little to do with sport; on the other hand, it is the sport-specific part of the program that turns out to be the top priority on a day-to-day basis. In other words, sport-based prevention programs are built on two different and often competing sets of interests and ideas that require a kind of “bait-and-switch” technique for prevention success. When resources are tight, it is typically the prevention-oriented aspects of the program (the “switch”) that are the first to be neglected. Program operators have few choices because sport (the “bait”) is the only reason participants get involved in the first place. The most unfortunate result of how these tensions played themselves out in the case of the Stay Alive program was that the program failed to put its own theories into practice and thereby undermined its very reason for being.

Findings to Build Upon

Although we were unable to conduct a systematic assessment of the Stay Alive program, our research was far from a complete loss. Not only did we learn a great deal about the various justifications and competing rationales behind these programs, but we also identified three important sets of findings concerning successful aspects of the program: recruitment, participant satisfaction, and the common characteristics of perceived success stories.

Recruitment. Perhaps the clearest success of the Stay Alive program was its ability to recruit the hard-to-reach target population of Native American and African American men aged 18–25. In 1999, the league served some 256 players, 65 of whom had participated in the program the previous summer. Of these 256 participants, 75% had a residence in the city of Minneapolis (down slightly but not significantly from the previous summer), 60% were African American, and 28% were Native American. (One



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variation here is that we added a multi-racial category that was used by 8% of participants.) Age of participants was the only area in which the program didn't entirely meet target expectations. Only 57% of participants were within the target age range, down from 78% the previous year. However, if the target age range is expanded to encompass 17- to 30-year-old men, then the program can be considered a success on this measure as well. It is important to note that 45% of those 18 or older who enrolled in the program had criminal history records as defined by the Minneapolis police department. Other characteristics of these participants such as education and employment suggest that they were representative of the target group in other ways as well.

Participant Satisfaction. Our interviews with and surveys of Stay Alive

participants revealed an extremely high degree of participant satisfaction with the program. Indeed, every individual we interviewed planned to play in the league the next year. Interestingly, however, this satisfaction had little to do with the prevention-oriented aspects of the program. Rather, positive participant assessments revolved around the opportunity for recreation and physical fitness that the program afforded. Given the problems with implementation mentioned earlier, this finding is not entirely surprising. Although the program's value as a sports league may seem unimportant (or even counterproductive) given the project's primary interventionist goals, providing physical fitness and recreation opportunities are important contributions given the pressures and cuts that public parks and recreation departments have faced in recent

years (the summer we were involved with Stay Alive, at least 10 full-court basketball playgrounds were eliminated from Minneapolis parks). Stay Alive provided these young men with the opportunity to be involved with positive, community-based recreation, a rarity for many of the participants during the rest of the year.

Characteristics of Perceived Success Stories. Our most important and revealing sets of interviews were those with program participants identified by staff as success stories. Our purpose in focusing on these participants was to try to understand *how* the program worked *when* it was perceived to work. The stories that these individuals told about how the program had helped change their lives were striking in that very few of them had anything to say about basketball or the program itself. The narratives of success mainly concerned networking

opportunities—finding new counseling and educational resources, participating in networks of social interaction, and the like. Digging a little deeper, we also found that for most of these individuals, other activities or events in their lives could help account for these changes.

Some might question the ultimate impact of the Stay Alive program itself, given that other factors could account for these success stories. However, after talking with these individuals, we came to see sport as part of a whole package of lifestyle activities and interests—part of a new network of social relationships and daily practices and activities—in which sport played a crucial and important role. It was an environment in which individuals could exercise their commitment to a new life freely and unconditionally; a place where they were often gently pushed in directions they might not otherwise have gone, as well as a place where they could find support and encouragement when the going got rough. It wasn't basketball alone that was the key to these individual success stories, but basketball did seem to be a very important and meaningful part of the package as it was experienced and understood by the people we interviewed.

Conclusions and Implications

It is easy to be skeptical about the crime prevention and social interventionist value of sport- and recreation-based programs like the late-night basketball initiative Stay Alive. Little tangible evidence of their effectiveness can be found, and if this program is any indication, they face many more problems and challenges than supporters may anticipate. But the fact remains that such programs are very much with us, and seem to be continuing to grow in popularity. Therefore, the most useful and appropriate question may be not "Do these programs work?", but rather "How

can we make them work better?" Based on our research, we came to the following conclusions.

First, programs such as late-night basketball seem to work as a tool for recruitment, for reaching out to otherwise hard-to-reach young urban men of color. Sport can be a hook, a tool for social outreach to set other programs in motion. This aspect of sport is often assumed by sports practitioners, but is neither well documented nor widely appreciated by those outside of sports.

Once participants are recruited, the question then becomes, "What does the program do with participants now that it has gotten them in the door?" Here, the results of our experience are less satisfactory, more cautionary than conclusive. In the case of Stay Alive, we saw a clear need for a better, more consistent understanding of how the nonsport aspects of the program would work, as well as procedures and resources that do a better job of putting into practice these elements of the program. We also saw that the power of sport as a tool for outreach and recruitment can be a double-edged sword. On one hand, program participation and satisfaction seem to be intimately linked to the quality and consistency of athletic competition. Simply put, you don't have a program without it. On the other hand, there appears to be a real tension between the sport and nonsport aspects of the program—a tension that impacts both how individuals experience the program and how the program itself is implemented and administered. Indeed, it may not be too much to suggest that these programs essentially and necessarily function as a sophisticated bait-and-switch operation. There is nothing inherently wrong with this—in fact, it may be both necessary and justifiable—but it is a tension that anyone using sport- and recreation-based programming needs to be aware of and be prepared to deal with.

Finally, we want to stress that whatever sport may have to contribute to social prevention for urban youth who are at risk, we must not expect too much from these programs. Risk prevention and social intervention are complex and challenging tasks even under the best of circumstances. Given their limited resources and their limited time with participants, sport-based programs should not be taken as a satisfactory solution to any social problem. To expect otherwise overestimates the social force of sport and underestimates the difficulties of prevention and social intervention.

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