

# Building Grassroots for Niche Sports

An Insurmountable Challenge?



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# Why Niche Sports?

- Niche: A place, employment, status, or activity for which a person or thing is best fitted (Merriam Webster)
- Niche sport: a lesser known sport (off the beaten path)
- Why Niche sports?:
  - More sports = More opportunities for youth
  - More sports = More variety



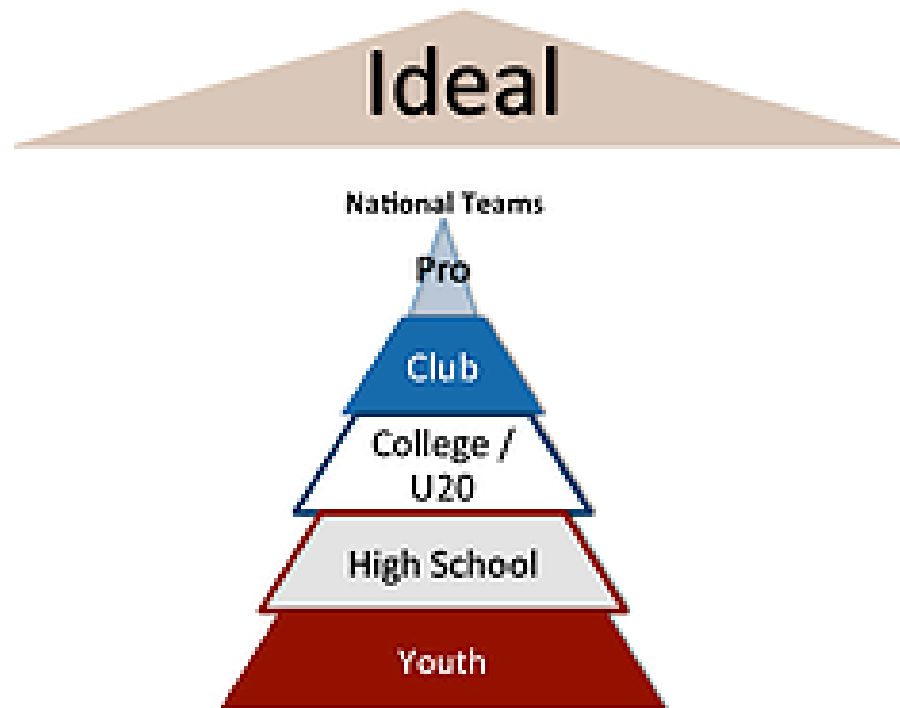
(In architecture: The statue fits perfectly in the niche)



(Team Handball: My niche sport)

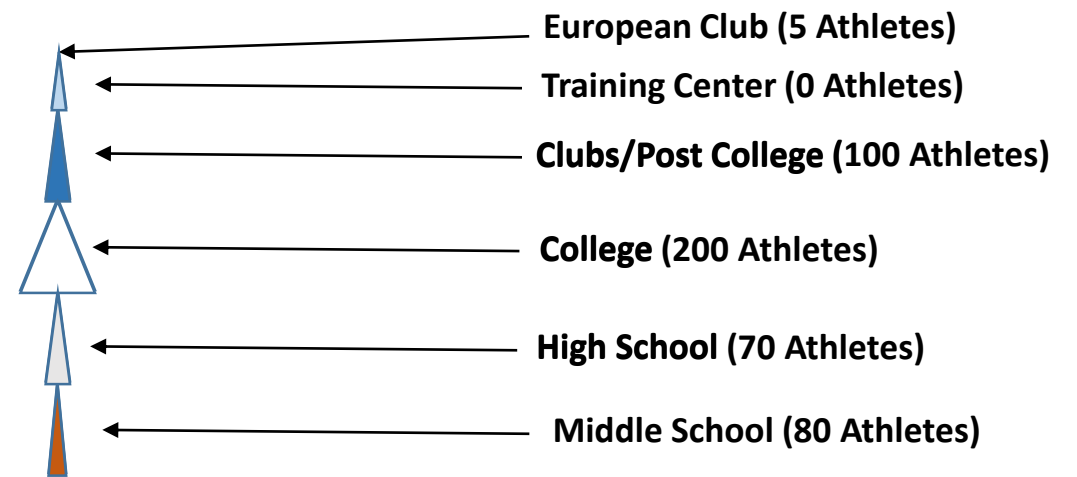
Now, more than ever, there's room for more sports and more opportunities for athletes

# Sports Structure (Pyramid vs Tower)



## USA Team Handball's Stateside Development Pyramid

**Tower\***

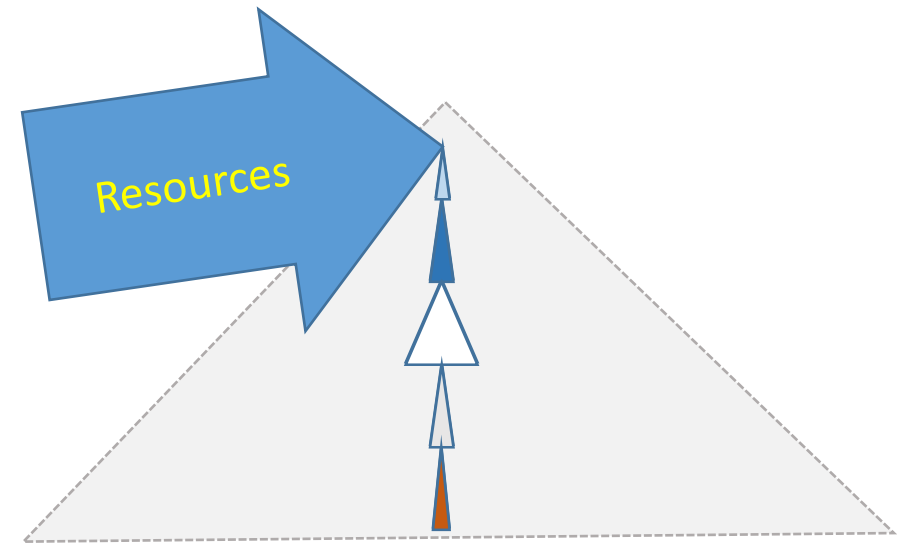


(Total American athletes (~600 Men; ~200 Women))

How should a struggling niche sport address its lack of a pyramid?

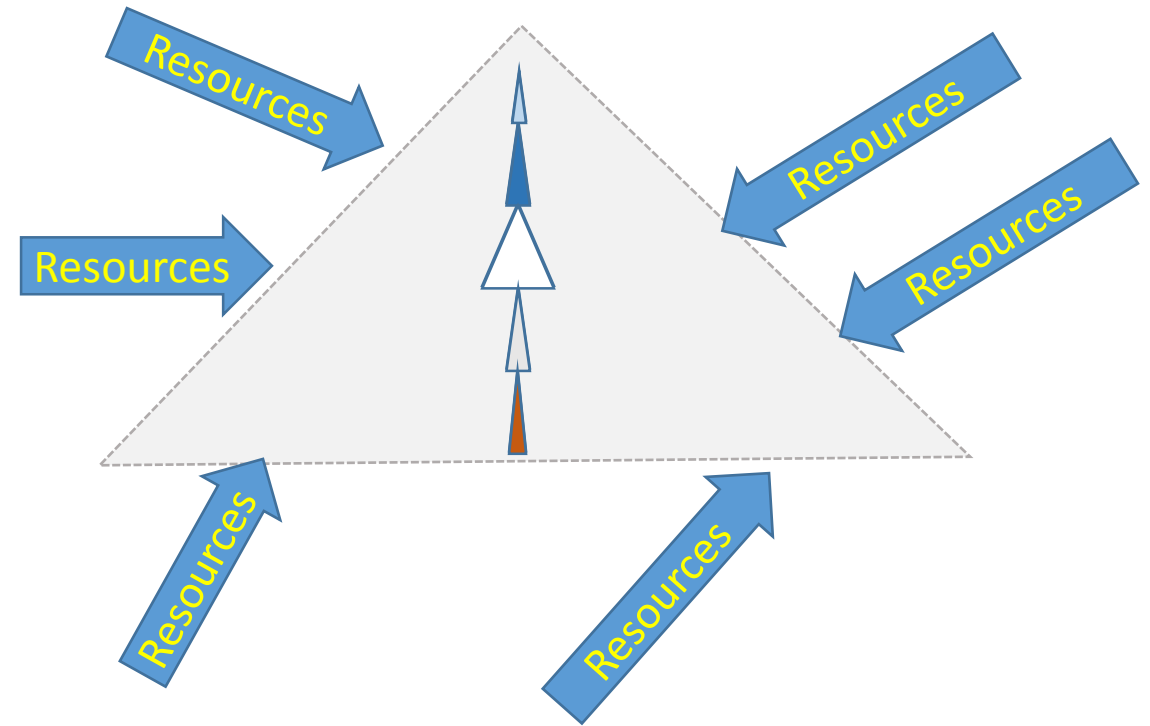
# A Focus on the Pyramid Tip: Why?

- Natural tendency to prioritize National Team performance
  - The NGB raison d'être
  - Most visible aspect of program
- USOPC Pressure
  - Funding support directly tied to assessed likelihood of medaling
- Top down strategy: Grassroots growth will follow National Team success
- Easier and more tangible to focus on just 2 national teams



# Reluctance to Focus on the Whole Pyramid: Why?

- The scale is imposing
  - Where do you start?
- It takes time
  - How long do you want to wait?
- Insufficient resources
  - Will efforts be spread too thin?



“If you build a **team**, you’ll never have a **program**. If you build a **program**, you’ll always have a **team**!”

- Dennis Berkholtz

(72,76 Olympian and former USA Team Handball President)

# A Little Help to Get Things Started

- Types of Growth
  - Organic: Growth just happens naturally
  - Inorganic: An extra push (help) from somewhere spurs growth
- Some possible sources of help for USA Team Handball
  - International Handball Federation (IHF) and top professional clubs
    - Funding for college program; placement of prospects with top clubs
  - USOPC
    - Change in philosophy?: Grants tied to grass roots development instead of national team performance?
  - NCAA
    - Pilot programs for niche sports?

A little extra push (inorganic growth) could spur self sustaining organic growth

# NCAA Sanctioning and USA Performance

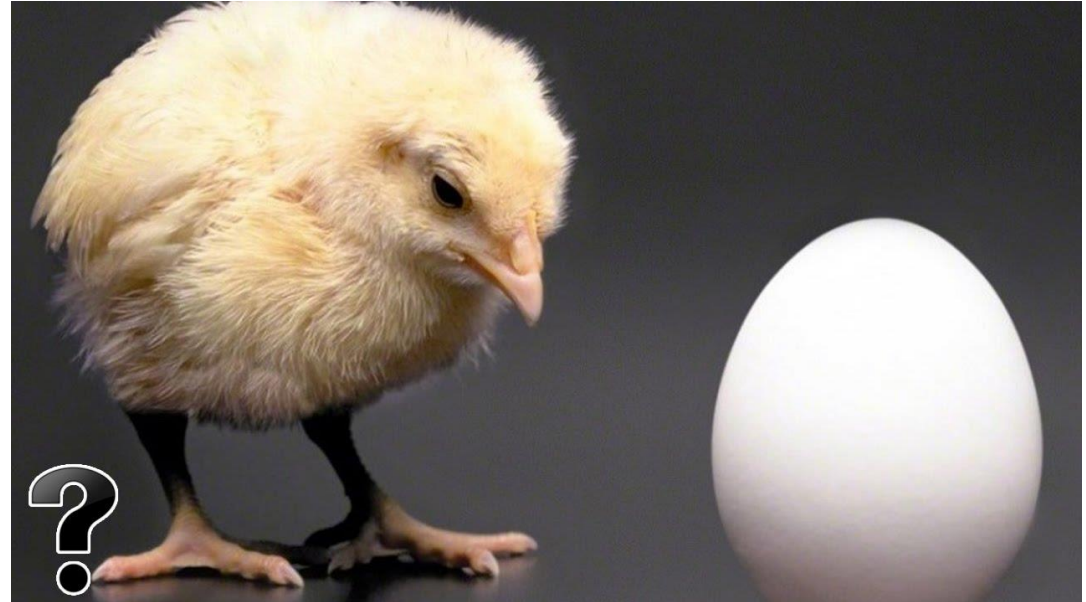
- NCAA Benefits
  - Well organized and structured competitions
  - “Compensated” athletes (scholarships)
  - Schools and clubs established to feed college programs
  - Colleges, in turn, feed national teams

Best USA Olympic Performances (Team Sports)			
Sport	NCAA Sport?	Men	Women
Basketball	Yes	1st	1st
Ice Hockey	Yes	1st	1st
Volleyball	Yes	1st	1st
Water Polo	Yes	2nd	1st
Soccer	Yes	4th	1st
Field Hockey (W)	Yes		3rd
Curling	No	1st	4th
Rugby 7s	No	9th	5th
Team Handball	No	9th	5th
Field Hockey (M)	No	11th	

No surprise: NCAA sanctioning and national team success are very highly correlated

# NCAA Recognition: Requirements Too Stringent?

- 40 varsity sport requirement
- Why not more pilot programs with select sports?
- Benefits
  - More student participation
  - More post college opportunities
  - More competitive national teams



If a niche sport was sanctioned by the NCAA... then high schools and clubs would play the sport more.

If more high schools and clubs played the niche sport... then the sport will get sanctioned by the NCAA.



# European Advantages for Niche Sports

- Club structure
  - Youth to Master's age based teams
  - All under one organization supporting each other
- No school sanctioning
  - No “gate keeper” to pass
- More compact geography
  - Lower travel costs



One Example: American Football in Denmark

# Insurmountable?

- Answer: No; Some sports have figured it out
- Niche Sports with significant growth
  - Ultimate
  - Curling
  - Lacrosse
  - Rugby
  - E-sports
  - Quidditch



(From fantasy book series to world wide club sport with thousands of athletes)

**Wait... What? Quidditch? Really? (Yes, Really)**

# Summary

- Building Grassroots
  - Not insurmountable
  - But, challenging
  - Extra help in targeted areas could make a difference

