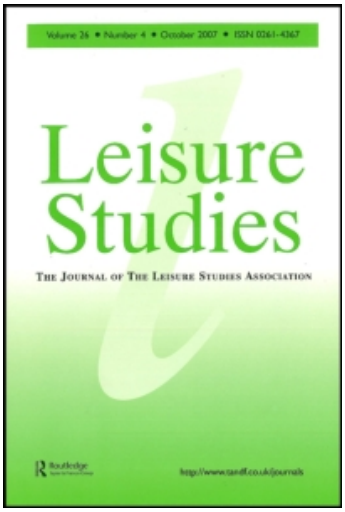

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Recapturing a Sense of Neighbourhood Since Lost: Nostalgia and the Formation of First String, a Community Team Inc.

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ABSTRACT *This qualitative study is an exploratory case analysis of* First String, a Community Team Inc., *a unique grassroots association founded by a small group of African Americans in Champaign, Illinois. The founders established the neighbourhood baseball league to foster a greater sense of community in neighbourhood youth. In an effort to address the lack of research on the formation of grassroots associations, the purpose of the study was to understand how and why* First String *was formed, and what this experience contributes to leisure studies and theory. The findings revealed the significance of nostalgia as a driving force behind the effort.*

KEYWORDS: *grassroots associations, nostalgia, collective identity, altruism, selective incentives, race, narrative inquiry*

Introduction

Despite increasing interest in grassroots organizing among leisure researchers (see Stebbins, 2002; Glover, 2003a; Sharpe & Arai, 2003), there remains a remarkable shortage of research aimed at understanding the collective action at the core of leisure-oriented grassroots associations (Smith, 1997, 2000; Stebbins, 2002). Grassroots associations are 'significantly autonomous, formal nonprofit groups that use the associational form or structure, that are volunteer run and composed essentially of volunteers as analytical members, and that have a relatively small local scope (i.e. locally based)' (Smith, 2000: p. ix). The omission of research pertaining to these organizational structures in leisure studies is particularly striking given that 'a substantial amount of all leisure takes place, partly or wholly, in grassroots associations' (Stebbins, 2002: p. 31). Instead, leisure research has tended to concentrate on individual volunteer behaviour (see Arai & Smale, 2002/2003) without giving

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sufficient consideration to volunteers' *collective* drive to form associations. This omission from the literature is surprising given that the history of our field is highlighted by the formation of many notable voluntary leisure service agencies such as the YMCA and Boys and Girls Clubs, agencies that first emerged as grassroots associations. The absence of literature associated with the *formation* of grassroots associations, in particular, has been highlighted by Smith (2000) who wrote:

> We need *much* more knowledge about the grassroots association (GA) formation and GA dissolution processes. Nearly all GA research focuses on the middle period of routine GA operation. Such research ignores the beginnings and endings that are nonroutine disjunctive events of great importance in GA and other voluntary group life cycles. Ignoring GA births and deaths is analogous to physiologists hypothetically studying humans only from 1 year to, say, 1 year prior to death. Such an approach is very incomplete, even though the majority of an individual's life or a GA's span in years would be covered. (p. 72, original emphasis)

In this sense, understanding formation (and dissolution) exposes leisure researchers to motivations that drive the social organization of leisure. As Stebbins (2002) argued, 'Much can be learned about why people participate in leisure in general, and certain leisure activities in particular, by studying the social organization of this sphere of life' (p. 1). With the additional recognition that 'race differences in the explanation of volunteering have not received much attention' (Wilson, 2000: p. 228), our aim in this study was to conduct an exploratory case analysis of *First String, a Community Team Inc.*, a unique grassroots association founded by a small group of African Americans. The founders' explicit aim was to foster a greater sense of community in neighbourhood children. Our objective was to understand how and why *First String* was formed to better appreciate collective voluntary behaviour organized around a leisure activity. Unexpectedly, the findings revealed the significance of nostalgia as a driving force behind the effort. What follows is a review of literature pertaining to volunteer behaviour, followed by a description of the method used before sharing the findings of our research.

Literature Review

Recognizing that there are conceivable, and possibly notable, differences between individual and collective voluntary action, our review will concentrate on the latter where possible. By collective action, we adopt a slightly modified version of Oliver's (2003) recent definition, which refers to '[voluntary (our addition)] action oriented toward achieving a common or shared interest among a group of people' (p. 198). With this definition in mind, we share a sociological view of voluntary behaviour, which regards volunteering, not as a predisposition, but rather as constitutive of action (Smith, 1982; Fischer & Schaffer, 1993; Midlarsky & Kahana, 1994; Wilson, 2000). We begin our review with a look at the elements of altruism and its potential influence on collective action, followed by a brief exploration of selective incentives and exchange theory, before ending with a discussion about the role of collective identity and social networks.

Altruism and Voluntary Action

Most researchers in the voluntary action (Fischer & Schaffer, 1993; Smith, 2000; Wilson, 2000) and leisure literature (Backman *et al.*, 1997; Parker, 1997; Stebbins,

2002) identify altruism as one of the core values rooted in (individual) voluntary activity. In a review of the altruism literature, Goss (2003) listed three components of altruism that scholars commonly recognize. First, altruism implies either an explicit motive or an explicit intent to improve someone else's welfare. Accordingly, Goss noted, if a person improves another's welfare without the intent to do so, his or her behaviour is not technically altruistic, whereas if a person intends to improve another's welfare, but unintentionally worsens it, he or she is still considered altruistic. Second, Goss made it clear that altruism implies action. Merely wishing someone well, she argued, is insufficient. Third, altruistic behaviour can possibly diminish an individual's own well-being while simultaneously enhancing someone else's. Again, the focus here is on intent. Though tied to individual action, we make the assumption these three components are conceivably evident in collective acts of selflessness and humanity, too.

While Smith (2000) acknowledged the presence of altruism in the efforts of most grassroots associations, he nonetheless distinguished between general altruism, which he argued is not unique to the voluntary sector, and *voluntary* altruism, upon which he argued the not-for-profit sector (in which he included grassroots associations) is built. Voluntary altruism, he posited, is composed of six elements (see Smith, 2000: pp. 19–20). Specifically, he argued it amounts to behaviour that is (1) humane-core-value driven (e.g. driven by civic engagement, socio-political innovation, sociability, personal social service), (2) moderately freely chosen by the association, (3) free of coercion, (4) sensitive to the recipient, (5) associated with an expectation to be under-remunerated or un-remunerated, and (6) associated with the expectation to receive some sense of satisfaction for the effort. These elements appear to fit well with the components identified above, albeit within the context of associational life. Smith's conceptualization is noteworthy if only because he attempted to define the actions of grassroots associations. Whatever the case may be, any effort to understand the formation of grassroots associations ought to explore altruism as a potentially significant motive.

Selective Incentives and Exchange Theory

Olson (1965), in his classic *theory of collective action*, argued that altruism alone is insufficient to influence collective action. He maintained that collective efforts to provide collective goods would happen only if actors were provided with what he called selective incentives – 'side payments' made to those who participate in the action. His idea of selective incentives has been modified over time, according to Oliver (2003), into a typology of three factors motivating individuals to participate in collective action: (1) material incentives, (2) solidary incentives, and (3) purposive incentives. Material incentives in grassroots associations may include tangible rewards for volunteer efforts (e.g. a plaque for recognition), and listing volunteer experiences as job experience (e.g. fodder for a resumé). Solidary incentives stem from social interactions, including the pleasure of socializing with people with whom emotional attachments may be formed. Purposive incentives denote the intrinsic rewards or pleasure people enjoy through their voluntary activity or by fulfilling their own normative or ethical standards of behaviour. These selective incentives are presumably necessary, argued Olson (1965), where the

benefits of collective action cannot be withheld from non-contributors who can potentially 'free ride' on the contribution of others.

As we interpret them, selective incentives imply a connection between voluntary behaviour and exchange theory. That is, individuals will not volunteer unless they themselves can profit from the exchange (Smith, 1982). Upon considering this notion, Wilson (2000) offered six reasons why exchange theory might help explain variation in volunteering. First, he argued, individuals do weigh costs and benefits when considering volunteer work. For example, Snyder *et al.* (1999) revealed how AIDS agencies struggled to recruit volunteers because of the stigma attached to the cause. Second, Wilson maintained that volunteers often have a stake in their own volunteer work. Crompton (1999) made a similar argument in his criticisms of co-production in which he noted parents are more likely to volunteer as coaches only after their children enrol in a sports league. Third, Wilson cited several studies that demonstrate people volunteer because they anticipate a future need for assistance themselves or have already received assistance and wish to give something back. Within a leisure context, Glover (2004a) shared experiences of active volunteers at a community centre in Southwestern Ontario, Canada, who viewed their volunteer behaviour as a responsibility, having received or expected to receive help from others. Fourth, Wilson argued volunteers explicitly acknowledge the benefits they receive from their work. Some homosexuals, for instance, deal with their own fears and apprehensions by volunteering to help AIDS victims (Field & Johnson, 1993; Omoto & Snyder, 1993). Fifth, Wilson suggested many volunteers long for recognition for their efforts. Indeed, recognition has long been identified in the leisure literature as a central issue in volunteer management (Crompton, 1999). Sixth, Wilson, like Olson above, noted volunteering often provides solidary benefits. Stebbins (2002) recently noted sociability, a salient component of solidary incentives, is evident in most leisure-oriented forms of social organization, including grassroots associations. With all of these arguments in mind, it seems reasonable to accept that the formation of a grassroots association could be driven by the expectations of its members to profit/benefit jointly from their collective efforts.

Irrespective of his arguments connecting volunteering with exchange theory, though, Wilson (2000) offered a number of criticisms regarding the relationship, too. First, while volunteer work might provide intrinsic benefits, Wilson noted they are not necessarily the reason why people volunteer. 'Volunteers might feel good about doing the right thing', Wilson wrote, 'but they do not necessarily do it because it makes them feel good; rather it makes them feel good because they think they ought to have done it' (2000: p. 222). Second, he argued that exchange theory assumes individuals make their volunteer decisions in isolation of other factors. In actual practice, though, he suggested, volunteers consider their settings and decide on courses of action in the context of formal and informal networks representative of feelings of collective identity (Rochon, 1998). Third, Wilson noted that exchange theory assumes people place their own interests before those of others. Other researchers (see Hart *et al.*, 1996; Schervish & Havens, 1997) have shown that identity is an important factor, though, insofar as many people think of themselves as the kind of person who assists others irrespective of whether they receive

recognition for their efforts or not. This alternative explanation might explain why volunteers often favour precarious, taxing, arduous work over ordinary, inconsequential, and everyday tasks (Chambre, 1991). Wilson's latter two criticisms point to the role of collective identity as a driving force associated with voluntary behaviour, a role we explore next.

Collective Identity & Social Networks

Research reveals that people are more likely to help those with whom they have some affinity or identification (Goss, 2003). In other words, collective identity, 'an individual's cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution' (Polletta & Jasper, 2001: p. 285), is significant in terms of influencing volunteer behaviour. There is strong support in the literature, for instance, to suggest black volunteers concentrate on needs more pressing in the black community (Sundeen, 1992; Portney & Berry, 1997; Ferree *et al.*, 1998). A collective-level analysis of community action assumes individuals' willingness to engage in activities for the sake of their community depends on whether they define themselves in terms of their collective identity as opposed to their individual identity. As Sturmer (2003) noted:

> [an] important step toward [collective] action entails the acceptance of and conformity to specific belief systems and community norms. For example, community members have to agree upon whom or what to blame for the community's problem (often an external opponent or enemy) and what would be the appropriate (normative) community action in the existing context (for example, whether to engage in mild or militant forms of collective protest). (p. 240)

Collective identity, therefore, is an important consideration in any examination of collective action. Under a similar premise, several researchers have turned to network analysis to explain the creation of mobilizing identities. We know, for instance, that broad social networks, manifold associational memberships, and previous volunteer experience all increase the likelihood of volunteering (Walsh, 1988; McPherson *et al.*, 1992; Marwell & Oliver, 1993; Smith, 1994; Jackson *et al.*, 1995; Wilson & Musick, 1997). Not surprisingly, extroverted people are more likely to volunteer, presumably because they get to know more people and join more clubs and associations (Herzog & Morgan, 1993). Moreover, social ties increase the chances of being asked to volunteer (Brady *et al.*, 1999), and face-to-face invitations are more effective than impersonal requests in terms of recruiting volunteers (Midlarsky & Kahana, 1994). Indeed, anything that promotes social solidarity among members of a community increases the likelihood of volunteering (Rochon, 1998), for social ties to a collectivity (e.g. a grassroots association) help define the voluntary action and thus make it easier to perform (Wuthnow, 1991). In sum, collective identity and social networks are clearly important in terms of mobilizing support for voluntary action.

Pulling it All Together

Altruism, exchange theory, and collective identity, though presented separately in our review, are conceivably rooted jointly in voluntary action. Polletta and Jasper

(2001), for instance, cautioned sociologists not to distinguish between collective identity and interests or incentives, for, as Wilson (2000) wrote, 'Social ties also encourage manifold relations that can be used as "side payments" to overcome the free rider problem; we do not want to let our friends down' (p. 224). Here, in Wilson's illustration, collective identity and rational choice are tied together. Wilson's comment also points to how altruism is often driven by collective identity: we want our friends to *do well*, too. Moreover, the connection between altruism and egoism is less dichotomous than it might appear. Mansbridge (1998) articulated how self-interest (represented by exchange theory here) and the public good (represented by altruism here) are ultimately interconnected. In sum, recognizing that variations exist among different cases, we still appreciate that collective action is conceivably driven by a combination of altruism, rational choice, and collective identity. Accordingly, we endeavoured to explore these constructs in the context of the formation of *First String*.

Method

Given our purpose for the study, we used a narrative approach to examine the grassroots association under investigation. As a socially constructed entity, we reasoned that *First String* was imagined and known in the stories its members told about it. By sharing a tale of a collective 'we', volunteers associated with *First String* presumably brought their association into existence (Polletta, 1998; Davis, 2002). Because stories are natural forms of organizational communication (Fisher, 1984, 1987; Czarniawska, 2002), they served as relevant data. For these reasons, narrative inquiry is regarded as an appropriate method to study grassroots associations. As Glover wrote:

> Narratives have the potential to help researchers understand what grassroots associations *mean* to individuals in relation to their lived experiences. They provide privileged access for understanding the way individuals articulate their experiences with grassroots associations over time, which can, in turn, give us insight into the meanings associated with these associations. (2004b: p. 50, original emphasis)

Keeping these strengths in mind, in our endeavour to examine the formation of *First String*, we aimed to appreciate the shared meanings research participants associated with founding the league.

Used for explanatory purposes, narrative inquiry helps to explain, through narrative, why something happened (Glover, 2003b, 2004b). The narrative account pieces together the order of events so as to make apparent the way they 'caused' the happening under investigation, in this case, the formation of *First String*. Causality, here, refers to the antecedents of a particular sequence as constructed subjectively by the individual (Polkinghorne, 1988). A narrative explanation, in other words, is retrospective in that it sorts out the multitude of events and decisions connected to the outcome of a story, selecting only those significant in view of the outcome and drawing them together into a single story that leads sequentially to a conclusion. Narrative explanation, therefore, takes on a structure of 'one because of the other' and implies 'things would have been different' if this particular event or combination of events had been different (Polkinghorne, 1988). In the end, narrative highlights the significance of particular decisions and events and their role in the final outcome.

The researcher, with this approach in mind, 'begins with questions such as "How did this happen?" or "Why did this come about?" and searches for pieces of information that contribute to the construction of a story that provides an explanatory answer to the questions' (Polkinghorne, 1995: p. 15). In attempting to answer how and why a particular outcome materialized, we searched for particular connections between events. The purpose of narrative analysis here was not simply to reproduce a sequence of events, but rather, 'to provide a dynamic framework in which the range of disconnected data elements are made to cohere in an interesting and explanatory way' (Polkinghorne, 1995: p. 20).

The point of narrative analysis, as demonstrated in the discussion section, is to determine the plot that underpins the story under investigation. Plot is the 'thematic thread' of a story that manages and gives significance to the progression of events (Polkinghorne, 1988). In particular, plot functions to configure happenings into story form by:

> (a) delimiting a temporal range which marks the beginning and end of the story, (b) providing criteria for the selection of events to be included in the story, (c) temporally ordering events into an unfolding movement culminating in a conclusion, and (d) clarifying or making explicit the meaning events have as contributors to the story as a unified whole. (Polkinghorne, 1995: p. 7)

In doing so, a plot connects events to the theme of the story, making them meaningful. Put differently, 'the significance of an individual event becomes apparent when one knows the plot of which it is a part' (Polkinghorne, 1988: p. 143). By gathering events together into a story, the plot emphasizes their contribution to the outcome and gives them significance in relation to other events. Given our aim to understand the formation of a grassroots association, we believe an explanatory approach to narrative inquiry was a relevant, appropriate and theoretically sound approach to use in our investigation.

While the strategy outlined for narrative analysis tends to privilege the storyteller's experience, interpretation, obviously, cannot be avoided. In the end, the final story must fit the data while concurrently bringing an order and meaningfulness unclear in the data themselves. As a result, the findings of a narrative inquiry cannot claim to correspond unerringly with what has actually occurred. As Guignon noted,

> Narrative always involves an element of construction that goes beyond what is determined by the data. As narrative studies have shown, narrativizing involves a 'fictive' element: It is a composing or configuring of events according to certain aesthetic criteria, and it therefore necessarily goes well beyond what is determined by facts alone…the 'goodness' of the story consists not in its being 'true' but in its being compelling and useful to the person who hears it. (1998: p. 560)

The findings of a narrative inquiry are not, in this sense, true if truth means exact correspondence or conformity to actuality. Narrative inquiry aims rather for what Heidegger (1927) called *verisimilitude*, results that have the appearance of truth or reality. Admittedly, perceptions of how and why *First String* was formed might have changed over the 10 years since the association was founded, depending on the perceived success of the league. With this in mind, readers are encouraged to recognize that the views presented offer only a snapshot in time.

First String*: A Case Description*

First String, a co-ed youth baseball league for children aged five to 12 years that fielded between six and eight neighbourhood teams, was selected for study simply because of its sheer uniqueness as a contemporary example of youth baseball provision in America. While Little League Baseball associations across the US are all governed and operated exclusively by volunteers, they are nonetheless highly institutionalized structures insofar as they all follow the same set of accepted procedures and practices. Few youth baseball leagues, if any, stray from conventional procedures (e.g. neighbourhood teams are disallowed). *First String*, in its attempt to provide an alternative, resisted the conventional model of youth baseball provision in America by focusing on delivery within a neighbourhood setting for the predominantly African American youth who lived there. Targeting a specific racial group differed radically from contemporary American youth baseball provision, which tended to forward seemingly 'race-blind' policies of integration.

As with any 'kitchen table' organizational design (Kikulis *et al.*, 1992), *First String* was characterized by undifferentiated task arrangements, low formalization of procedures, and informal decision making. Accordingly, it featured a rather modest organizational structure in which the six founders rotated among six positions: president, vice president, treasurer, secretary, program coordinator, and member. Irrespective of the formal positions, however, Peter, our main contact in the study, served as the chief organizer, recruiter, and league booster since 1994, *First String*'s inaugural season. The roles, we were told, were largely in place to give the impression of a formal organization to potential external funders.

The mission of *First String* was articulated by Peter as follows in a letter he drafted to solicit funding from local charities and businesses:

> First String, 'a community team', Inc. is a group of concerned citizens who are willing to give their time to make northwest Urbana and northeast Champaign areas a better community for our youth to live. We are creating programs that are vacant in these communities and that are not duplicating or interfering with existing programs. We are also extremely interested in all youth (especially males) ages 5–12 years (and provide mentorship to 13–14 year olds) who are prone to gang violence, racism, low self-esteem, neglect and lack of positive adult role models. We are *totally* committed in making First String, 'a community team', Inc. a front-runner in working on problems that confront our youth. We are working to bring unity back into our communities. Where the young respect the adults and the adults provide a positive role model for the youth; where everyone knows everybody's family; and where you can enjoy the evenings sitting out on your front porch and not worry about anything negative happening. We strongly believe, and have faith, that one day soon, this will be restored back into our communities and *together, we can make it happen!!* (Peter, original emphasis)

Regrettably, no other documentation about the league was available. In any event, baseball, the original and central activity of the league – *First String* has since expanded to include a basketball program during the baseball off-season – is conspicuously absent from the paragraph above, therein illustrating the association's focus on outcomes over activity. We provide richer details of the desired outcomes below in our findings section, but suffice it to say, the league was intended to assist youth in the neighbourhood in which the founders and participants lived.

Neighbourhood Profile

The neighbourhood in which the league was established warrants description to help readers contextualize the case under investigation. Located in Champaign, Illinois (USA), the neighbourhood was characterized by its older housing stock and its high percentage of vacant units – owner occupancy was only 52%. According to the 2000 Census data, almost 90% of the neighbourhood's population was African American, 7% was Caucasian, and 4% was Latino. The percentage of dependents – children 18 years or younger – in the neighbourhood (34%) was higher than the citywide figure (18%). Fifty-eight percent of neighbourhood households were home to single-parent families, 86% of which were headed by a female. The median family income was $25,435, which was roughly $24,000 lower than the citywide figure. Ten percent of the households received some sort of public assistance as a form of income in 2000. The Illinois Department of Employment Security reported Champaign's overall unemployment rate in 2000 was 2.3%, whereas the unemployment rate in the neighbourhood was nearly five times that amount at 10.5%. In sum, the neighbourhood profile depicts a place in which there were several constraining factors with respect to the facilitation of positive youth development.

Research Participants

The research participants for this study consisted of seven adults who were connected to *First String* in some sort of an active capacity. That is, they were individuals who helped in some way to produce the collective goods the organization provided. Four were league founders, one was the recreation director responsible for programming at the park in which league played its games, and two were volunteer coaches. Admittedly, we spoke with a relatively small group of individuals, but, to be fair, many grassroots associations, particularly leisure-oriented grassroots associations, are comprised of few individuals. *First String* was no different in this regard. It was unclear how many people actually volunteered for the league over its (at the time) 10-year lifespan, but only six individuals, specifically the league founders, were consistently and actively involved with its operation. The four founders and recreation director with whom we talked had followed the growth and development of the league over its 10-year existence, whereas the two coaches had only volunteered for *First String* for one season.

For a variety of reasons, namely because of the relatively small scale of the league, the lack of volunteer support from parents in the neighbourhood, and the involved nature of assisting with the league organization, the founders, as it turned out, had difficulty recruiting coaches and sustaining their participation. The two coaches were recruited to participate in our study to determine whether the story of the league's formation effectively filtered down to the volunteers and framed their appreciation for the collective effort. In short, then, four of the founders agreed to tell us about their efforts to start the grassroots baseball league for children in their neighbourhood, and the recreation director and coaches offered their observations and understandings of the process.

Data Collection and Analysis

Face-to-face, conversational interviews, which lasted, on average, one hour, were tape-recorded and transcribed into text as the primary source of data for the study. We were actively engaged with our research participants in a process of trying to understand important aspects of the events that led to the formation and development of the *First String* baseball league. In this sense, our research participants were invited into our work as collaborators, *sharing* control over the research process. For the most part, we encouraged research participants to take control of the interviews, trusting that the research participants, if uninterrupted by standardized questions, would 'hold the floor' for lengthy turns and organize their replies into long stories (Reissman, 1993). Thus, we interrupted only periodically to help clarify or probe deeper for greater detail. With this in mind, each interview began with the simple request, 'tell me how *First String* came into being', and the remainder of the interview flowed according to the research participant's direction.

We initially organized the data chronologically, and then identified the elements that, in our view, contributed to the formational development of *First String* and the subjective connections the research participants associated with cause and influence of the events that led to its development. In this regard, the analysis, at least at the outset, was unlike more conventional qualitative analyses, which tend to deconstruct narratives into common themes and explain the interconnections between them. By contrast, we synthesized the data into a sequence of events and then attempted to isolate the defining features of the events that were significant to the formation of *First String*. Though this process is consistent with narrative analysis (see Polkinghorne, 1995; Glover, 2004b), the findings include descriptive accounts of certain features of the *First String* in order to provide readers with the rationales associated with decisions the founders made.

Findings

To give voice to the research participants, we used their words and personal stories where possible to describe the events that led to the formation of *First String* and the decisions regarding its structure. The narrative that follows is also based on our own interpretations and aggregation of the data.

Around the Kitchen Table

First String, a Community Team began as many grassroots associations do, with an informal discussion among a group of close-knit people (Sturmer, 2003). 'We was over at my wife's aunt's house at the kitchen table', explained Peter, 'just a bunch of us sitting around, but it was just like a family discussion going on, and we were discussing the problems of the community, the problems in our neighbourhood…We talked about, "What's up with these kids today?"' In responding to this question, the conversation drifted to recollections about 'the way things used to be when we were growing up, how Douglass Park used to have a lot of life in it with baseball games and softball games and just different activities' (Deborah, one of

the league founders). Douglass Park, the urban green space located at the core of the neighbourhood that served as home field to *First String*, had 20 years earlier been a major hub of community life during the founders' youth. As Peter recalled, 'At one time there was a softball league at Douglass Center that was real popular, extremely popular. On a night game you could find just about everybody in town at the softball game'. Evidently, the games played an integral role in facilitating social interaction among neighbours: 'when games were in the park and the lights were on', Deborah reminisced, 'everybody in the neighbourhood came out and watched a good softball game'.

The social nature of the softball games personified the well-connected network of neighbours that was a recognizable part of the founders' childhood experiences. In Peter's words,

> when we grew up not only did people know us in our block right here, they knew us in the next block, they knew us in the block over, all up and down that whole block of Church Street. Everybody knew who we were. They knew the McFarlands, they knew the McNeils, they knew the Blackwells. Everybody knew the mothers, and they knew the Terrys. Everybody knew everybody on that block! If we was down the street messing up (laughter) my mother would've got a phone call.

This characterization of the neighbourhood was shared by all of the founders with whom we spoke. There was a collective sense that the neighbourhood was once a place where neighbours knew and looked out for one another. It would seem the residents, at the time, enjoyed a genuine sense of community. Rasul, who at the time of data collection was the director of the community centre located onsite at Douglass Park, noted the influence the founders' past had on the founders' call to action:

> For these people, the past in this neighbourhood was such a community driven environment. You could go to this person's house for tutoring, this person would look out for you, this person would spank you if you weren't doing something right, so that was their sense. And there was always something that, as a young person, you were never bored, or you never even had to make up your own stuff because there was always something provided. So I think that's what drives them [to organize *First String*].

Evidently, the founders' positive childhood memories of their neighbourhood led them to long for the past and lament the present conditions of their neighbourhood.

Regrettably, the norms of reciprocity built up by the neighbours eroded over time and the neighbourhood softball games eventually disappeared, though the actual reason for and specific sequence of the events that led to this transformation were unclear to the research participants. Deborah described the change:

> All of a sudden, [the games] just died, and [the Park District] put a garden there where the big softball diamond was…something happened. I guess there was a lot of violence and just people acting crazy and not respecting their community any more. Then I'm sure they had to do something to take care of it, so, that's why they put a garden up and fenced off that area where you couldn't walk through the park from, like off of the street. So they closed that off.

The deterioration of the social landscape of the park coincided with the disappearance of the baseball diamond. In association with this turn of events, it was not uncommon to witness fights in the park, and the field was often strewn with beer bottles. As adults who had remarkably different childhood experiences and

recollections of the park as a positive social space, the founders bemoaned the unfortunate change to their neighbourhood.

Accordingly, the kitchen table conversation returned to the present-day problem and the group brainstormed strategies to recapture the sense of community that had, in their view, since been lost. According to Deborah, the group agreed 'the kids need something to do that's constructive'. From there, Peter explained, the group devised an informal plan:

> Someone made the comment, 'Well, how come everybody talks about [the community's problems] and nobody does anything about it?' And I think that's how it really started. We started saying, 'Well, maybe *we* should do something about it'.…And then we started discussing things about what's not in our neighbourhood. What can bring the kids together and how can we reach a bunch of kids at the same time? Baseball season was right around the corner, so we started a little baseball league. (original emphasis)

Fostering Sense of Neighbourhood

The goals of the founding group were ambitious, but they began with a simple premise: attract the children to the park with baseball, foster in them a greater sense of neighbourhood. With respect to the former objective, Peter explained,

> [*First String* is] more about kids getting a chance to do something enjoyable, take their minds away from their home life because some of them have it really rough. And they bring it to the park sometime, but the majority of the time they really have a good time. They really have fun, and that's what we try to get out of the kids. Kids come out to have some fun, meet some friends, and play some ball. So that's what it's all about.

Why baseball? In Peter's words, 'We thought that getting back into baseball would draw a few kids, which it did'. Similarly, in a separate interview, Deborah added, 'we started with athletics, 'cause that's what kids really like, and that's how you draw them in, and then we were going to build off of that'. As an observer, Rasul shared a similar understanding of the founders' reasoning: '[they chose a] baseball league because they kind of knew baseball would take in a large number of young people. Baseball taught a lot of other skills'. But, as Rasul (and the others) noted, 'we're doing more than just playing'.

'One of our first objectives', explained John, one of the founders, 'was to try and get kids familiar with each other, to know each other. Not only in school, not only in church, but *in the neighbourhood*' (emphasis added). With this objective in mind, the founders approached the local Park District to enter a neighbourhood team in its established little league. The Park District, however, would not agree to add a team comprised exclusively of neighbourhood children. Rasul, an employee of the Park District, clarified the basis for the Park District's decision:

> The way the Park District runs their youth leagues is, the teams have to be broken up, so the young people couldn't play with themselves. They joined the Park District league, so you couldn't have a Douglass Park team…Nobody can really just come in with their own team unless it's kind of structured…if we joined then all [the kids] would have to become members of all the other teams.

Scattering the children among the other teams failed to meet the founders' aims, so the founders opted to form their own modest neighbourhood league. The motivation to do so was, again, tied to the founders' past experiences. Rasul explained:

> It's back from their memories. And so there was always like these home grown teams that would compete with another home grown team, so whether it was a team that was from this area of town that would then compete with the west area or Urbana or southwest…so that was the whole sense. You would have a community team because they all knew each other, they would end up going to school with each other, after practice they would study together because they were all in the same neighbourhood. So that was kind of the whole sense of that.

Consequently, *First String* allowed the children to create their own teams comprised of neighbours from their block or other friends and family from the neighbourhood: Leonard,[1] a volunteer coach, explained:

> You can organize your own team…You can say, like, five neighbours on my row who want to be on the same team. So you accommodate them. Or you only have five good players and you need of course a full roster of maybe 12 or 15 players. And so, you have your five and then you can pick from a pool of other young people who are not chosen yet to fill up the rest of your roster.

By allowing neighbours to play together, the founders hoped to facilitate a bonding experience for the children. 'I think, for the young people, it does create a sense of community for them', Michelle, one of the league founders, argued, 'because most of the young people that are around here, they're all involved in a league'. Fostering a sense of neighbourhood was described as an explicit goal by all of the research participants, a goal preserved in the very name given to the league: *First String, a Community Team Inc*.

Using their own youthful experiences as a point of departure, the research participants agreed that community was fostered through shared experiences and the stories recounted about them. 'Later on today', Rasul pointed out to us excitedly during his interview, 'you'll see a bunch of red shirts go over to the field and practice, or you might see a bunch of blue shirts with blue hats leaving the field because the red shirts are coming on to practice. [The kids] come in and they all know each other…With the league, *everybody has something to talk about*' (emphasis added). Peter offered a similar observation: 'The major benefit is that [the kids] have more friends. They have more people they can relate to, who do the same thing. *They got something to talk about* other than school' (emphasis added). The creation of shared stories was important to the founders because, as Michelle described it, '[*First String*] is about fun and having good experiences that *you can grow up remembering*' (emphasis added). Deborah shared this sentiment, too:

> I think what we really want to do is just *leave some kind of positive indentation on them* [the kids]. And when they leave, when they leave us, they can say, 'I'm glad that I was part of that' or even if 10 years down the line they come back to us and say, 'thank you', or just speak to us. All we want is just to do something positive for them and touch their life. (emphasis added)

In short, the stories shared among the children of their experiences participating in *First String* – not only of their time spent playing baseball, but of the more informal moments they shared together, too – were expected to enrich the children's lives by building strong ties within the neighbourhood.

A Focus on African American Heritage

For the founders, their sense of neighbourhood was inextricably linked to their racial identity, so they used the league explicitly to serve the African American

community, provide African American role models, and celebrate African American sport heritage. It was no surprise, then, that the league participants were overwhelmingly African American. 'The people who founded it', Rasul explained, 'they wanted something for African Americans, so they were clear on who the entire population was that they wanted to serve'. The founders themselves were explicit about this objective. In describing her decision to join the grassroots effort, Deborah said, 'so I thought, well, I can contribute to the black community'. Further, the founders expressed their desire to involve the African American community in the operation of the league. In John's words,

> Our whole thing was, when we started this thing, was to be wholly supported by the black community. If we can get this whole thing going and be supported by the black community, that'd be great. Well, if we didn't have to ask anybody else for money, that'd be the greatest thing. We'd know that, hey, we've got the support of the black community, black businesses, and all this, to do for African American kids.

As it turned out, the founders necessarily canvassed the wider community to acquire financial support for the league (e.g. sponsorships, equipment), but the original intent to foster support within the African American community continued to be one of their chief aims.

Part of their motivation to start a neighbourhood children's baseball league was also tied to providing African American youth with African American role models. 'We want people who look like us to help us', explained Deborah. 'We shouldn't have to always go outside of our neighbourhood and get help. We should be able to help one another, and we need to teach people that. So, that's what we did'. Moreover, Peter thought having black role models 'makes a bigger difference…They get a little bit better response out of the kids'. As Deborah put it, 'We look like them and we look like their parents, and we understand the culture versus people out there in other neighbourhoods. Whether you're talking about racial or economic or social cultures, we are different. We know our kids'. Connected to this notion of 'knowing our kids' was the absence of African American role models in the established Park District league, which played an important role in motivating the founders to start a league of their own. As Peter told us,

> We noticed that there was no Black involvement in Little League. One of us asked the question, 'Why not?' and the answer was 'Because the parents won't bring them. It's too far away'. And so Douglass Center is right in our backyard, so that's why we started it at Douglass Center. To me, it was just the fact that the kids weren't able to get to those games. The closest park was a pretty good distance when your parents don't have transportation. And most of the kids live right in walking distance of Douglass Center.

In addition to a lack of participation by neighbourhood parents and guardians, the children who did participate in the Park District league were often the lone African Americans on their teams. 'A lot of times, their kids are the only black on the [Park District] team, and not every kid can handle that', argued Deborah. Presumably, the children would feel more comfortable playing in a league where the majority of the participants belonged to the same race.[2] Besides providing African American role models, the founders decided to expose the children to African American heritage associated with baseball. They named the teams after the old Negro League clubs. Michelle explained:

> They were named after the All Negro league teams, so we are teaching them a part of our sports history. Like, this was an all black team. We had Ernie Westfield, for example, when we'd have our end of the year banquet there at Pizza Hut. Ernie Westfield would talk about the Negro league and show them pictures and had some of the paraphernalia there, 'cause that's part of our history. You'd hear about George Carver, Martin Luther King, and Malcolm X, you hear about those, but you don't hear about the Negro League baseball players, and so the positive of that is that we we're able to focus on our history in sports, in baseball.

By tying the names of the teams to the old Negro League, the founders were attempting to subtly show the youth there was a historic relationship between African Americans and baseball. As Rasul mentioned, 'There's no real history lessons or anything like that that's gone over, or even about the Negro Leagues. It's not really done that way. The community aspect is what they try to emphasize'. Despite these explicit attempts to celebrate their collective (racial) identity, the founders did not view their actions as political practice. Peter commented,

> I'm not really worried about making a political statement. I'm more worried about kids finding themselves and realizing their abilities and capabilities, that they can survive no matter what's brought to 'em. They do have the support of people to do these things. Maybe they don't have support at home that they all need, but they have support somewhere. That's why we were trying to get into these other things besides this baseball. We'd looked at baseball as a way of opening up and getting to them. It's sort of like finding something, you want to talk to somebody, you find their interests. Once you find their interests, then you can branch off into something that you're trying to do for them, or you think would be good for them to get into. That's how you do it. You gotta find something interesting to get 'em there. If we don't get them there, you can't talk about the other things.

These sentiments were shared by the other founders, too. The founders failed to see their actions as a form of activism or resistance, even though some of their other comments suggested otherwise.

Paying it Forward

Ultimately, the founders articulated their motivation to organize a neighbourhood league as repayment to the neighbourhood for their positive communal experiences of the past. Speaking of her childhood in the neighbourhood, Deborah commented, 'We always were taught to give back. And that's what we're doing, 'cause we grew up in that area'. Building on this comment, Deborah later added, 'When I was growing up, I had a lot of people around me helping me out and encouraging me, so I feel obligated. It's not an option for me. I was obligated to give back to the community'. This sort of comment did not surprise Rasul, who offered his observations:

> My sense was that a lot of the black men that I've come across in Champaign who were born and raised here, they have a good memory of their childhood. And as they get older they have a strong sense of wanting to do something similar to what was offered to them in their childhood. Those that really end up staying here do…that's their sense. And so most of these people were what they call the Boys and Girls Club Kids. Now we have the Douglass Kids.

Figuratively, the older generation strived to develop to a generation of neighbourhood kids that shared their sense of connectivity. Perhaps Michelle summed it up best when she remarked,

> 'Cause the community gave you something, either positive or negative, while you were growing up, so you should just give back to your community. If everybody did that, then a lot of things can get done, but so many people just don't want to get involved. They just want to go and do their own little thing. So this is not about that. We, we all believe that you help those that are less fortunate than you, and when you do, someone else will help you, 'cause everybody needs help every now and then.

In sum, the founders were driven to re-establish the neighbourhood bonds they so appreciated from their youth.

Discussion

Every story deals with a plot or a transformation of some sort, so it is no surprise, in this regard, that the story of *First String* follows such a conventional narrative structure. According to the founders, the strong neighbourhood ties they associated with the neighbourhood of their past diminished over time as their generation grew older. This change happened to coincide with the disappearance of the neighbourhood baseball diamond, a visible symptom of the neighbourhood's transformation. That the baseball diamond came to mind so prominently in their recollection and proposed solution intuitively makes sense, given that 'we summon to mind and communicate among ourselves those comforting images from our pasts…which seem to iconically bestow upon that past an age-graded distinctiveness and separableness that mere chronological divisions could never by themselves engender' (Davis, 1979: p. 102). The baseball diamond, in other words, was clearly an icon of the founders' past, representing youthful images of a well-connected neighbourhood and shared sense of 'we-ness'. Correspondingly, collective identity appeared to be centrally rooted in the founders' decision to form a baseball league for neighbourhood children.

Indeed, the founders' shared memories of the neighbourhood of their youth were instrumental in driving the founders to take collective action. Reportedly, their neighbourhood was at one time a place where children knew each other and got along well, parents looked out for and, when necessary, disciplined other parents' children, and neighbours gathered regularly to socialize at the neighbourhood park where baseball games involved recognizable community members. All of these warm reflections served to depict a strong sense of community that ostensibly pervaded within the neighbourhood. Evidently, the founders aimed to recapture this seemingly lost sense of community and give neighbourhood youth a similar shared experience to the one the founders had enjoyed while growing up in the neighbourhood. Given the central role their socially constructed past played in their framing of the problem, the founders and their decision to organize *First String* appeared to be inspired largely by nostalgia.

Nostalgia naturally involves a comparison between past and present circumstances. 'What occasions us to feel nostalgia', Davis (1979) wrote, 'must also reside in the present, regardless of how much the ensuing nostalgic experience may draw its sustenance from our memory of the past' (p. 9). Nostalgia is one of the means individuals employ in constructing, maintaining, and reconstructing their identities (Davis, 1979). The dramatic contrast between the present-day neighbourhood and the neighbourhood of the founders' childhood, in effect, seemingly

created a disconcerting sense of discontinuity with respect to the founders' shared identity. Accordingly, the founders appeared to act to create *First String* to retain some sense of continuity of identity. Nostalgia, Davis argued, can repair the sense of loss accompanied by identity discontinuity by creating a shared generational identity to mend a lost one. The importance of nostalgia for correcting discontinuity is that, as Davis noted,

> it always occurs in the context of present fears, discontents, anxieties, or uncertainties…It is these emotions and cognitive states that pose the threat of identity discontinuity…that nostalgia seeks, by marshalling our psychological resources for continuity, to abort or, at the very least, deflect. (1979: p. 34)

In relation to *First String*, the association's founders were clearly discontented, anxious, and uncertain about the future of youth in their neighbourhood, particularly after witnessing anti-social behaviours, the apparent disappearance of strong neighbourhood ties, and the general lack of respect youth demonstrated toward peers and adults. These behaviours and attitudes were apparently inconsistent with the founders' own identities as individuals who also grew up in the neighbourhood, thereby unsettling the founders because the change represented a loss of the identity they previously experienced and shared. By reminiscing, the founders recaptured their emotional connection to their neighbourhood therein retaining some semblance of continuity with respect to their relationship with it. In so doing, they essentially reassured themselves that they were capable of taking on the present ills with which their neighbourhood was faced. The denouement of the story, therefore, is that the founders realized neighbourhood change would only come if they acted collectively to retain their vision of the neighbourhood. Sense of place, once disrupted, can often lead to feelings of discontinuity. Milligan (2003) recently argued,

> A major source of identity continuity is the locations or types of locations within which given identities are enacted; when continuities of location are disrupted, disruption in identity continuity likely follows. Repeated interactions in specific sites or types of sites will typically result in *place attachment*, or the bonding of people to place. Disruption of this attachment and the continuity it had provided results in identity discontinuity. (p. 382, original emphasis)

In other words, shared spaces in which groups gather, whether they are neighbourhoods or baseball diamonds, become salient features of a group's collective identity. Indeed, Stedman (2003) noted that features of a physical environment offer salient contributions to place meanings and attachment. Any change to a meaningful environment, such as the loss of neighbourhood reported by the founders or the disappearance of a youthful icon such as a baseball diamond, can motivate groups to act to re-stabilize their identities.

The notion of retaining continuity of identity as an underpinning of voluntary behaviour has been identified elsewhere in the voluntary action (Yeung, 2004) and leisure (Stergios & Carruthers, 2002/2003) literature. Stergios and Carruthers (2002/2003) studied retired teachers, social workers, and doctors who volunteered to assist children in need. Through their interaction with the youth, these retired professionals retained some semblance of continuity with respect to their identity, which had very much been wrapped up in their careers and job-related connections to youth. Where *First String* differs is, the founders were mobilized into collective

action to retain their continuity of identity by deliberately forming a grassroots association. Here, the founders provide an example where collective identity and exchange theory dovetail. In her discussion of nostalgic experience, Milligan (2003) noted, 'in most situations of loss, individuals look for a means to preserve their former identities or to establish new ones in order to regain a sense of continuity' (p. 383). Under this premise, to a certain extent, it is reasonable to surmise the founders acted on their own interests to regain their sense of continuity.

But altruism was also clearly a factor in their efforts to act collectively. By forming *First String*, the founders were undoubtedly determined to address youth development in their neighbourhood. Ostensibly, they sought to transform (or return) their neighbourhood from an *epidemic or contagion model*, which emphasized negative peer influences, to a *collective socialization model*, which focused on the positive influence of adults who served as role models and supervised neighbourhood children (Jencks & Mayer, 1990). In this regard, their behaviour was altruistic, for it was an explicit intent and deliberate action to improve the children's welfare (Goss, 2003). By forming a league of their own (e.g. neighbourhood only, African American), the founders seemed intent to shape the shared experiences of neighbourhood youth in whom they wished to foster stronger neighbourhood and racial bonds. This variation of 'differentiated solidarity' (Young, 2000) reveals the importance of bonding social capital (Gittell & Vidal, 1998; Putnam, 2000). Communities of interest must have spaces or activities in which they can express, reaffirm, and celebrate their distinctive identities, particularly if these communities occupy a minority status within the wider community. In claiming such a space or facilitating such activity, these groups resist dominant cultural expectations, demonstrate their own unique identities and behaviours, and co-construct alternative identities (Shaw, 2001). In this regard, the formation of *First String* was a political act of resistance, albeit apparently unintentionally political according to the founders. The league provided neighbourhood youth with an activity in which they were free to celebrate their African American heritage and their residence in a predominantly African American neighbourhood, while forging a stronger network of African American peers. Here again, it is difficult to separate altruism from collective identity, for the founders' interest in assisting the African American youth in their neighbourhood was clearly tied to their racial and neighbourhood identities. For the founders, these identities appeared be nested within a broader collective identity associated with their generational cohort.

Evidently, the founders developed a collective nostalgia for a mutually agreed upon past that defined and created a generation. Nostalgia produces a 'generation' by instilling a sense of identity among individuals based on their awareness of shared past experiences. Davis (1979) argued,

> nostalgic sentiment dwells at the very heart of a generation's identity; that without it, it is unlikely that a 'generation' could come to conceive of itself as such or that 'generations' in advance or in arrears of it would accede to the distinctive historical identity it claims for itself'. Without nostalgia, the generation 'would otherwise remain a featureless demographic cohort'. (p. 111)

Moreover, Davis wrote, 'so many of the other faces of nostalgia search for, build upon, and memorialize what we hold in common with others, those shared experiences of an earlier time that symbolize what was and is, after all, *our* era and *our*

generation' (Davis, 1979: p. 40). But the appreciation the founders had for their own experiences did more than simply create a generational identity; it ultimately translated into an effort to foster a similar, yet distinct, generational identity for the children who presently lived in their neighbourhood. Indeed, the founders argued they *owed it* to the neighbourhood youth to reciprocate for the experiences they themselves once enjoyed as neighbourhood youth. By facilitating a shared experience among the neighbourhood children, the founders reasoned the children would come to co-construct stories that would serve to bring alive a collective identity. In so doing, they acknowledged, as have other scholars (Rappaport, 2000; Glover, 2003a; Putnam & Feldstein, 2003), the importance of storytelling in forging community.

With respect to the role of storytelling in the formation of *First String*, founders appeared to discover during their kitchen table discussion, that there was a group of like-minded individuals that shared an interpretive framework (e.g. a need to address youth issues in the neighbourhood). In this sense, the story was constructed collectively through the social interactions of family members in a process Klandermans (1988) referred to as the 'mobilization of consensus' and was granted community narrative status as it was shared with others (Rappaport, 2000). The formation of *First String* around this shared interpretation and assessment of their neighbourhood institutionalized their belief system. Consistent with the tenets of narrative inquiry, acting collectively generated a collective understanding or social construction of reality. It created a logical story in which their problems could be identified, objectified, and attacked. It was a story in which the protagonists and plot were identified, and the protagonists (the founders) felt entitled and responsible to do something about the problem at the centre of the plot (deterioration of 'their' neighbourhood, youth development). By defining the social decline of their neighbourhood both as deterioration and tragedy, the collective action of the founders became heroic. Thus, the audience simultaneously sees the story of the construction of a perspective (the association is the subject, its narrative is the object of the analysis) and the story of the neighbourhood drama (the founders are the heroes, the deterioration of neighbourhood bonds the objects).

Conclusion

This study illustrates the interconnectedness of altruism, selective incentives, and collective identity as drivers of collective action. *First String* was formed altruistically insofar as the founders wanted to facilitate a bonding experience, provide strong adult role models, and improve neighbourhood life for neighbourhood youth. The league's formation was also tied to exchange theory inasmuch as the founders began the league to retain their continuity of identity. And the founders' call to arms, as it were, was clearly driven by their generational connection (collective identity) with their fellow founders who shared youthful memories of their neighbourhood that contrasted sharply with their perceptions of the neighbourhood's present state. These motives are tied and appeared to reinforce each other to characterize the collective voluntary behaviour of the founders. In short, the formation of a grassroots association is seemingly too complex to reduce its inspiration/voluntary action to only one identified motive.

The findings of this study are perhaps more notable, however, because they connect the idea of nostalgia to the formation of a grassroots association. That is, shared nostalgia was situated within particular constructs of voluntary organizations. Nostalgia was evidently an important driving force in Glover's (2003a) recent study of the Old Town Neighbourhood Association that built a community garden to 'reclaim its space', yet nostalgia was never mentioned explicitly as a driving force. By noting these findings, however, we do not wish to imply that nostalgia drives *all* grassroots associations and their formation as clearly such associations are formed for a variety of reasons. It seems reasonable, though, that grassroots organizing at the core of urban revitalization attempts, in general, are perhaps driven by nostalgia (e.g. loss of community). Until now, this observation has gone unrecognized. We wish to reiterate, however, that no single theory provides an adequate explanation for the emergence of grassroots organizations.

As noted earlier, the present case study examines a relatively small group of individuals, so we encourage future research on the subject to naturally focus on a larger number of associations, particularly different types of grassroots associations. Further, we join Glover *et al.* (2005) and Stebbins (2002) in calling leisure researchers to increasingly study grassroots associations. Correspondingly, we wish to add our voices to the increasing number of scholars advancing an exciting new body of literature connected to leisure and community research (Arai & Pedlar, 2003; Cook, 2003; Glover, 2003b; Stewart *et al.*, 2004). Community is clearly manifest in many leisure pursuits and their associational forms and so organizational structures such as grassroots associations warrant greater attention from leisure researchers.

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Notes

1. At his request, this particular research participant's name is represented by a pseudonym to protect his anonymity.
2. There were Caucasian and Latino children who participated in *First String* too, but they were a small minority among the teams.

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