

4.1 Sport, tourism, and community development: The Izhma case

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Introduction

In northern remote settlements, distances are measured in days but not kilometers and survival often depends on physical abilities and agility. Hence, the essential elements of the way of living and education of northern residents include physical activities and skill games. Historically, skiing and tynzey (lasso) throwing have constituted a significant part of everyday life for Komi-Izhemtsy. Gradually, they have been evolving into professional and amateur sports. The story of Izhma sportsmen is considered as one of the most successful in cross-country skiing and national sports². Drawing on the historical roots of traditional Komi sports, the article discusses the role of skiing and national sports in community development in Izhma region.

Izhma development partnership and workshops 2011

This study was conceived during the “Izhma development partnership and workshops 2011” project. The initiative belongs to the Thematic Network on Local and Regional Development of the University of the Arctic in partnership with a number of Russian non-governmental and educational organizations. The purpose of the project was accelerating socio-economic development of rural areas in the Komi Republic.

Sport activities in Izhma region had a big potential to become a focal point in the partnership-for-development building. However, the main representatives of the sport and sport enthusiasts have not been available to participate in all workshops and partnership meetings.

² National sports include: axe throwing of; tynzey (lasso) throwing on a horey (pole); sledge jump; triple national jump; cross-country running with a stick.



At the same time, the importance of sport-related activities for the community has been outlined already at the preparation stage of the project. A large number of social projects and entrepreneurial initiatives of local people have been linked to some sports activities. Among the ideas were such projects as ski rental services, weekends sport clubs, ski races, expanding national sports, extreme tourism, sport activities for adults, winter outdoor activities, etc. many of which held a potential to entry into the profitable sector.

The major objective of this study was to develop an understanding of the role of traditional sports in the community development process of the settlements of Izhma region. Drawing upon historical development, the paper explains the connection between the livelihoods of rural people and their engagement in sport activities, both on the professional and amateur levels. Further, the study assesses the potential of tourism development and other entrepreneurial sport-related activities initiatives in community development. The study was exploratory and interpretive in nature. The main sources of information have been the interviews with a physical education teacher, a trainer at a sport club, and sportsmen. Sport instruction, official documents, and media-content have complemented the sources of information.

History and roots of traditional Komi sports in Izhma region: cross-country skiing

Skis have been used in northern remote rural communities of Izhma region for a long time. Local hunters have been using fur-covered skis (lyampy). Skis have also served as a means of mobility and transportation connecting reindeer herding camps to villages where schools and public services have been located.

The development of skiing as a sport activity has been induced in the beginning of 20th Century. It was the beginning of the formation of the regular army of the Soviet Union. Since then, young men have been recruited and equipped with army equipment, including wooden skis. Villagers used to bring skis with them to their homeland after the end of their military service. This marked the start of skiing competitions. Later, Komi-Izhemtsy took an active part in propaganda campaigns which stimulated the sport's development. A skiing tour Izhma-Syktvykar (about 500 km) was one of the main projects. The outside temperature reached -40°C at night and skiers were moving 40 km per day.



The first sport school club “Belka” (“Squirrel”) in Izhma region was opened in 1965. The number of young sportsmen increased each year. During several decades after the school opening, numerous local sportsmen took part in National Ski Championships, World Ski Championships, Olympic games, and many of them demonstrated outstanding results. Three of them have reached the level of Olympic champions in cross-country skiing. It is surprising for a region of nineteenth thousand people.

It has been suggested that livelihoods based on reindeer herding and appropriate way of living have contributed to the success of Izhma’s sportsmen (Shomysova, 2008). Biography of the skiers informs us that they were born and raised in reindeer herders’ family. Raisa Smetanina³ spent all her childhood in harsh conditions of northern tundra. When she was three years old, Raisa got her first primitive wooden ski and skiing became a part of her everyday life. Raisa was found skiing to school and back home dozens kilometers per day. During her school time, it was a “big competition” between local schools in cross-country skiing which was a very effective tool in training and helped her to achieve good results. Raisa is a very industrious and hardworking person. These traits came from her reindeer herders’ childhood and genes. After her achievements she has been called “White Queen”. She became a part of world ski elite and a role-model for many generations of skiers.

From the point of view of Northern multisport coaches, sportsmen with reindeer herder’s origin show better results, especially in the sledge jump, national triple jump, and tynzey throwing. It could be partly explained by physical features of body inherited from ancestors. Reindeer herders have always used special ski covering with “camus” (reindeer’ hard fur) that

³ **Raisa Petrovna Smetanina** (born February 29, 1952 in Mohcha, Izhma region) is an honored master of sports of the USSR. Smetanina took part in five Olympics. In particular, Smetanina won two gold and one silver medal at the 1976 Winter Olympics, becoming the most successful athlete there. In the 1992 Winter Olympics, at the age of thirty-nine, Smetanina won a further gold medal in the 4x5 km, becoming the first woman to win ten Winter Olympic medals and at that time the oldest woman to win a Winter Olympic gold. Smetanina also had successes at the FIS Nordic World Ski Championships, winning four golds (20 km (1982), 4x5 km (1974, 1985, and 1991)), four silvers (10 km (1978), 20 km (1978), 4x5 km (1982, 1989)), and four bronzes (4x5 km (1978), 5 km (1974, 1978), and 20 km (1980)). In 1979, Smetanina received the Holmenkollen medal. She was also awarded Order of Friendship of Peoples (1984) (Shomysova, 2008).



require a special skiing technique. Skiers must make strong efforts with their big toe to move the ski. The technique had being used for many generations of reindeer herders and has caused a specific transformation of the foot that is passed on to generations.

National sports

National sports have been mainly developed as a system of physical education of young generations for work activities such as hunting and reindeer herding. They were held in the form of games and competitions. Children played the games every day; adults took part in them during holidays after fieldwork, after deer calving, during weddings, and during traditional festivals and fairs. Simplicity and emotionality are the main features of the games.

Later, many of the games have been practiced as national sports (often performed as a complex and called the Northern multisport program). There are five kinds of national sports that are included in the program: five sports for men and three sports for women.

Axe throwing (men only).

An axe weights over 350 grams and has a metallic part and a handle. The recommended size of the metallic part is 140-160 mms (length of blade), 30-35 mms (width of blade), 55-60 mms (length of butt), 30-35 mms (length of butt). A handle is made out of any wood material, preferably birch, pine, or larch. The recommended size is over 50 cm for length, 3.5 to 6 cm for width and 1.5 cm for thickness. The axes are made considering characteristics of a sportsman (leading hand, height, speed, etc.) The activity is held on a 50 meters wide open field. A sportsman has three attempts to throw the axe in order to achieve the best result.

Tynzey (lasso) throwing on a horey (men only).

A tynzey is a lasso for reindeer catching made from skin. Its maximum length is 30 meters. A horey is a three meters high wooden stick. The distance between the throwing point and the horey ranges from seven meters (for children of age 8-9) to fifteen meters (for sportsmen above 16 years old). Sportsmen have three attempts to throw the tynzey in order to achieve the best result.



Sledge jump (men, women).

The size of sledges for adults is 50 cm (height) x 50 cm (width above) x 70 cm (width below) x 120 cm (length). For children and girls the sledges are smaller (40 cm x 40 cm x 60 cm x 120 cm). Ten sledges are located on a straight line with 55 cm between each of them. A sportsman has three attempts to jump. The goal is to jump over all 10 sledges avoiding long pauses, to turn at the end (waiting period of 5 seconds is allowed), and to jump back. The sportsmen should make as many jumps as he can until he stops or moves a sledge.

National triple jump (men, women).

Triple jump consists of three jumps without pauses. The movement of both legs should be synchronized. Each sportsman has three attempts to jump.

Cross-country running (men, women).

The goal is to run with a stick in hand within a populated area or in rugged terrain. The distance is 5 km long for men and 3 km for women. The stick should be made of metal, wood, or other material and be less than 130 cm in length.

Natural, social, and cultural factors influenced the development of national competitions. Some of these sports were developed because they contributed to the development of specific physical qualities needed in the herding profession. For example, an axe has always been an attribute of hunters, reindeer herders, or fishermen. A reindeer herder could strike a reindeer leg with the axe in order to catch him. "Long hand" is the second name of a tynzey. Herders need just several seconds to catch a reindeer in the large herd. Tynzey throwing is the first test for a young herder, while tynzey throwing on a horey is the test for maturity. Another example is running with a stick on rough terrain. A stick has been used to cross swamps, ravines, and mountains, as well as during long walks (slogs) to relax shoulders and back. These are examples how a working attribute becoming a sport.

Other disciplines have been practiced with a reference to legends. For example, it is believed that a national triple jump emerged as a part of a legend informing us how hunters used to escape from wild animals, like wolves: a man was doing three jumps from stone to stone using his both legs and crossing a river.



Sports education and institutions

In small communities, where many opportunities available in the big city are absent, the sports institutes fill in an important part of everyday life. Additional education for children and teenagers is on the mass form of development, occupation, and recreation. The institutes do pedagogical work with large number of children who are in need in recovery, occupation, and personal development during the time after school and in summer.

National sports have been recognized officially in 1928 when the Komi Regional Council of Physical Culture approved 7 different national sports. They were reindeer racing, axe throwing, cross-country running, tynzey throwing on a horey, sledge jumping, and the national triple jump. All of them were included in the Northern Reindeer multisport competitions. Usually, the competitions were held two times per year when reindeer herders were returning from pastures in villages and gathered together in Izhma center. There were 24 reindeer herders on the holiday "Reindeer Herder Day" in 1946, while the number increased to 60 in 1948. Men and women participated equally in the competitions.

Lessons of national sports at schools for children and youth within the Komi republic were opened only in the 1970s. The first republic festival of traditional games and national sports took place in 1990 with the purpose of preserving identity and reviving traditional physical culture, including national sports in education, and attracting youth to national sports. Since 1993, regional competitions in Northern multisport program were annually held in Izhma with participants from Syktyvkar, Naryan-Mar, Salekhard, and Inta. Since 2000, the Izhma team has been taking part in competitions of national level and many Izhma sportsmen have demonstrated good results. The Izhma team took part in the Russian Championships in Salekhard in April, 2000 (taking eighth place); the Russian Championships in Naryan-Mar, 2003 (taking second place); the Cup of Russia in Labytnangi, 2003; the Cup of Russia in Hanty-Mansiisk, 2008; Open Championship and the Cup of Russia in Yamalo-Nenets a.o., 2009. The Championship of national sports of the Komi Republic took place in Izhma in April 2010. Currently, Izhma is the only one area in Komi where national sports are still practiced.

Nowadays, the main activity of the Sports school for children and youth is skiing. Since the opening of the school, two skiers became international Masters of sports; twenty-five skiers



became Master of sports of Russia. There were 497 young sportsmen from 15 schools in 2010/2011 year. There are 10 full-time coaches and 10 part-time coaches. Annually, the Sports school conducts 12 or more local competitions, and 2 competitions of regional importance. Sportsmen from the School take part in regional and national competitions. There are three groups of the Northern multisport programs in the Sports school: at Kipievskaya school, in Izhma, and a new group in the Brykalanskaya school is opened since 2010. Three trainers have been educating 89 young sportsmen.

The development of national sports in Izhma region has demonstrated that Komi-Izhemtsy was able to continue practicing the traditional activities unlike other regions of the Komi Republic. People's wish to preserve their own culture and identity, as well as remoteness and isolation from the regional center, all contributed to sports development.

Sport and Community development

Izhma region represents an example where community development processes can be linked with residents' involvement in traditional sports-related activities. Numbers of studies have shown that sports activities positively affect public health and contribute to the solving of social problems (Bowtell, 2006; Coalter, 2002). Moreover, sport is a very important factor of personal development and a part of the educational process. However, there are other dimensions of sports contribution to community development.

Reinforcing identity

Relatively high levels of practicing traditional sports in Izhma region is a result of the strong identity of the people. As well, it is an important factor for reinforcing identity. On the one hand, Komi-Izhemtsy wishing to keep its own culture and traditions during the process of assimilation with Russia during Soviet times, and the process of globalization in the present time, have maintained and developed traditional sports. On the other hand, the practice of traditional spots allows younger generations to identify themselves with Komi-Izhemtsy as reindeer-herders. Traditional sports also brings the feeling of belonging to own nation and own culture.



Formation of a “trademark”

The identity has another dimension. Sport education serve as a “brand”, a “trademark” of the Izhma region that gives the community recognition and puts the community name “on the map”. It creates attractiveness for the region and opens doors to the future. Initiating businesses on the image of traditional sports, like skiing and national sports, could have an enormous multiplicative impact for both community and economic development. Such “trademark” would give a reputation of being forward, and will attract new entrepreneurial initiatives and people to the region.

Bridging social capital

Community development is connected with the active participation of community members in strengthening the community through involvement, mutual help, and cooperation (Coalter, 2002). Local sport institutes serve as bridging social capital for the local development in Izhma region. Geographically based Sports schools attract people of various backgrounds with the common interest in sports, especially for their children. The Sports institute equips individuals with skills, knowledge, self-esteem, motivation, and social relations which people can use in other contexts as well. Komi-Izhemtsy taking part in local competitions in traditional sports build social relations, characterized by democracy, openness, reciprocity, and trust, which facilitate the entrepreneurial spirit and contacts between various actors within the community. Moreover, sports activities might build social capital in the form of regional cooperation. Sportsmen from different regions participating in competitions build social cohesion between each other.

Traditional Sports and Tourism

As traditional sports are an important part of Komi-Izhemtsy’ history and culture, they hold a potential for tourism development. Among perspectives of tourism development in the region there are event tourism (the traditional holiday “Lud”), cultural tourism, and historical tourism that could be developed for tourists from inside and outside the region. Traditional sports could be a part of these tourism activities.



Nowadays, interaction between traditional sports and tourism could be found only during the traditional “Lud” festival. Besides many cultural activities, guests and local people are welcome to take part in national sports. Last year, the Republic championship in Northern multisport program was linked to the “Lud” festival. The main purpose was to attract more attention to the sports. The initiative is also interesting from the side that it involves sportsmen from outside Izhma region as tourists to the “Lud” festival. However, there were two main problems. First, as it is the Championship of the Komi Republic level and there are no traditional sports schools in other Komi regions, there were just a few sportsmen from Ukhta (former Komi-Izhemtsy) competing with Izhma-sportsmen. Secondly, the championship took little attention compared with other cultural events.

Earlier, sports were a part of the Reindeer herder Day. Reindeer race and national sports were essential attributes of the holiday. Unfortunately, since 2000 this event has not been held. Since reindeer herds became registered in Naryan-Mar, fewer reindeers approach into Izhma.

Perspectives of traditional sports in Izhma region

The rich history of traditional Komi sports in Izhma region, their background with reindeer herding, and the strong identity of people with their traditional way of life all indicates that traditional sports is one of the main assets of the community. Therefore, its further development has strategic importance for the region. It is also important to harness the power of traditional sports in developing community engagement and building community capacity (Bowtell, 2006).

Perspectives on traditional sports depend on local initiative as well as the involvement of people and administration support. Administrative support of traditional sports facilitates development. It is crucial to create a Department of Sports and Tourism Development within the administration of the region. A department with corresponding functions existed in the past, but was closed.

National sports education would also bring benefits if it were expanded further into remote settlements. This is also important from the point of view that reindeer herders’ families live in such settlements and national sports will be popular among youth. Moreover, it will be possible



to find new talents in national sports. Izhma coaches and sportsmen could take the initiative to spread national sports among other Komi regions, such as Inta, Vorkuta, and other reindeer herder settlements. Demonstrating national sports in traditional festivals and providing master-classes, the Izhma' sportsmen could arouse an interest among the regions and contribute to the creation of national sports branches there.

Revival of the Reindeer herder Day could make a significant contribution to tourism development. Reindeer races have the potential to attract many tourists not only from Izhma region, but also from neighboring regions and big cities. For this purpose, it is necessary to breed a small herd of reindeers especially for tourism purposes. Practicing national sports should be an important part of the holiday. The attempt to make the activities "paid" could raise a wave of indignation because local people are not used to paying for such activities. The Reindeer herder Day should be intensively promoted in neighbouring regions and big cities of the Komi Republic. A well-organized and interesting holiday has a chance to be a successful initiative.

Program planning

Sport development in the region should be built on planning process producing a strategy and action plan. Meanwhile, community participation in its development will be a critical factor in its successful implementation. Firstly, the program should be developed taking into account interests of all stakeholders: coaches, sportsmen, parents of young sportsmen, local people, businessmen, administration, civic society organizations, etc. Public hearings, individual and group interviews, and surveys are important tools to take into consideration stakeholders' interests. Moreover, the practice of creating a partnership that includes representatives of all stakeholders' groups and which operates on principles of equality, mutual trust, respect, and understanding, could be effective. Participating in all steps of the program development, implementation, and evaluation, the partnership will facilitate effective sport development.

Secondly, the program should focus on not only sports, but also community development. Thus, the program should have at least 2 dimensions: development of sport, development of community through sport. Development of sports inclusion could have the following desired outcomes:



- Active propaganda of sports activities;
- Removal of barriers to traditional sports participation in the community among population;
- Expansion of traditional sports in remote settlements;
- Training and support of leaders and coaches;
- Establishment of links between local schools, sports institutions, and the community;
- Intensification of national sports development, etc.

The main community development aim through sport is social inclusion. Such development will be more 'needs based', using sport to address broader aspects of social inclusion and as a means to promote aspects of personal, social, and community development. These projects aim to use sport to achieve social outcomes such as:

- Improving the fitness and health of population;
- Addressing issues of community safety and reducing levels of crime;
- Contributing to improved school attendance and educational performance;
- Developing social and technical skills, and increasing employability;
- Reducing level of alcoholism and suicide;
- Making the community attractive for living.

And thirdly, the program should be based on existing and potential projects, both productive and social-oriented, in the sphere of sport. Productive projects such as creation of a new ski rental services, popularization of national sports, extreme "touristic path", fitness centers, and others should be considered as a backbone for both sports and community development.

Summary

Through analysis of historical roots of traditional Komi sports in Izhma region and its current situation, we have identified that sports has an important role in community development in Izhma region. Our conclusions are mainly:

1. Izhma region has rich history of traditional sports development. Cross-country skiing is the most important sport for the community. Due to their strong identity and reindeer herding background, Komi-Izhemtsy were able to maintain the practice of national sports unlike other Komi regions.



2. Reindeer herding background is considered as one of the main reasons for the high professional sport results of Komi-Izhemtsy sportsmen. Analyses of Olympic champions' biographies and coaches' findings indicate that sportsmen with reindeer herding origin more often show better results.
3. The role of traditional sports in community development process in Izhma region consists in reinforcing Komi-Izhemtsy' identity, forming a regional "trademark", building social capital, assisting in solving social problems, and contributing to personal development.
4. Tourism application of traditional sports in Izhma region is in the process of development and is characterized as event-supplement for main cultural activities.
5. Further development of traditional sports has strategic importance for the region. Establishment of the Department of Sport and Tourism in the local administration, expansion of national sports within remote settlements of Izhma region and other regions of the Komi Republic, and revival of the Reindeer herder Day increase opportunities for the development of sports and tourism in the region.
6. Sport development in Izhma region should be built on a planning process producing a strategy and actions plan. Meanwhile, the community participative element of the development is a critical factor in its successful implementation. The program should focus on both sports and community development and be based on existing and new productive and social projects.

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