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Understanding dropout and prolonged engagement in adolescent competitive sport

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Abstract

Objectives: The purpose of this study is to gain understanding of training patterns and roles of significant others (i.e. coaches, parents, peers, and siblings) in adolescent swimmers' sport participation patterns.

Design: The developmental model of sport participation [Côté, J., Baker, J., & Abernethy, B. (2003). From play to practice: A developmental framework for the acquisition of expertise in team sport. In J. Starkes, & K. A. Ericsson (Eds.), *Recent advances in research on sport expertise* (pp. 89–114). Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics; Côté, J., & Fraser-Thomas, J. (2007). Youth involvement in sport. In P. R. E. Crocker (Ed.), *Introduction to sport psychology: A Canadian perspective* (pp. 266–294). Toronto: Pearson Prentice Hall] was used as a framework.

Method: Ten dropout and 10 engaged swimmers, matched on key demographic variables participated in a semi-structured qualitative interview.

Results: Groups had many similar experiences (e.g. early training, supportive and unsupportive coaches, involved parents). However, only dropouts spoke of early peak performances, limited one-on-one coaching, pressuring parents during adolescence, lack of swimming peers during adolescence, and sibling rivalries. In contrast, only engaged athletes spoke of clubs' developmental philosophies, coaches' and parents' open communication, school friends' support, and siblings' general positive influences.

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Conclusions: Findings highlight the importance of appropriately structured programs and the fragility of athletes' relationships with significant others during the adolescent years. Implications for sport programmers, coaches, and parents are discussed.

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Keywords: Youth sport; Attrition; Coach; Parents; Peers; Youth development

Introduction

Organized sport plays an important role in the development of today's children and youth. With millions of children worldwide participating in community, school, and privately run sports programs (De Knop et al., 1996), the physical and psychosocial benefits of sport involvement are well recognized (see Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005, for a review). However, as many as two-thirds of participants aged 7–18 withdraw from sport each year, with attrition rates being particularly high during adolescence (Petlichkoff, 1996). Consequentially, sport psychology researchers have identified youth sport dropout as an area of concern (Gould et al., 1982).

Much of the youth sport dropout research has been framed within motivation theories, with most commonly cited reasons for withdrawal including conflicts of interest, and negative experiences such as lack of fun, coach conflicts, and lack of playing time (see Weiss and Williams, 2004 for a review). However, it has been suggested (Lindner et al., 1991) that reasons such as these obtained through questionnaire data are intuitive, superficial, and subjective in nature, and that studies should focus instead on *why* youth have other interests, and *why* youth are no longer having fun. Côté and colleagues' developmental model of sport participation (DMSP: Côté et al., 2003; Côté and Fraser-Thomas, 2007) provides a framework to explore some of the physical (i.e. training patterns) and psychosocial (i.e. role of significant others) factors that may influence youths' sport participation patterns.

Developmental model of sport participation

The DMSP (Côté et al., 2003; Côté and Fraser-Thomas, 2007) emerged from extensive retrospective interviews with athletes in a variety of sports, and proposes that athletes pass through three stages of sport development: the sampling, specializing, and investment years. Athletes participate in a variety of sports during the sampling years (age 6–12), and a decreasing number of sports during the specializing (age 13–15) and investment years (age 16+). Further, athletes engage in large quantities of deliberate play activities during the sampling years (activities that are less structured, designed to maximize inherent enjoyment, and regulated by flexible age-adapted rules; Côté & Hay, 2002) and do not focus on deliberate practice activities until the specializing and investment years (activities that are highly structured, require effort, generate no immediate rewards, and are motivated by the goal of improving performance rather than inherent enjoyment; Ericsson et al., 1993).

The DMSP (Côté et al., 2003; Côté and Fraser-Thomas, 2007) also highlights the roles of significant others (i.e. coaches, parents, peers, and siblings) in assuring healthy and prolonged youth sport participation. Specifically, the model outlines how during the sampling years, coaches

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