

Guest Editorial

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Youth Sport Participation and Withdrawal: Is It Simply a Matter of FUN?

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In 1990 the Athletic Footwear Association (AFA) (1) released a report entitled "American Youth and Sports Participation" that examined teenagers' (ages 10-18 years) feelings about their sport involvement. This report was the culmination of an extensive study of more than 10,000 young people from 11 cities across the U.S. in which issues related to why teenagers participate, why they quit, and their feelings about winning were addressed.¹ The results highlighted in the AFA report indicate that (a) participation in organized sports declines sharply as youngsters get older, (b) "fun" is the key reason for involvement and "lack of fun" is one of the primary reasons for discontinuing, (c) winning plays less of a role than most adults would think, and (d) not all athletes have the same motivations for their involvement.

Although these findings fall in line with the current research on sport participation and withdrawal, the explanations forwarded have simplified a rather complex and interdependent issue. In this editorial I will examine further each finding highlighted in the AFA report and offer some rationale for these findings.

Participation Declines Sharply

The AFA report indicated there was a steady decline in sport participation, both school and nonschool, between the ages of 10 and 18. These findings are consistent with the Michigan Youth Sport Institute's investigations conducted in the 1970s (10, 11, 12) which revealed that an alarmingly high rate of attrition occurred in youth sports between 11 and 13 years of age. Furthermore, the majority of research conducted to date indicates that, on the average, 35% of the teenagers and preteens involved in organized sport drop out each year (3, 9).

What these statistics fail to tell us, however, is whether this withdrawal from sport is permanent or temporary. There is evidence that some children re-enter sport at the same or different levels of involvement (e.g., drop out of youth soccer to become involved with the school's football team) whereas other children permanently withdraw from sport with no plans for future involvement (for reviews, see 3, 5, 13). Hence, some young people identified as dropouts

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may in fact be sport or level transfers. There is a need to follow teenagers and preteens through participation phases to gain a better understanding of sport involvement and withdrawal. Simply asking whether they currently participate or intend to participate tells us little about the extent of their involvement, nor does it indicate what opportunities are available to them in their current situation.

Another viable explanation for the steady decline in sport participation focuses on whether the youngster controls the decision to withdraw. Gould (3) stipulates that *child controlled* withdrawal occurs when the child is the one who decides to discontinue participation, whereas *externally controlled* withdrawal occurs when a child is cut from the team, participation costs become prohibitive, no program exists for the child's level of ability, or the child suffers a season- or career-ending injury. In the latter case the child has virtually no control over whether he or she continues involvement, and this type of withdrawal may be associated with more negative feelings about participation in sport.

Child controlled withdrawal, on the other hand, may elicit both positive and negative affect toward sport participation. That is, as children grow older they have more opportunities outside of sport (drama, school band, work, etc.) that may force them to make choices. Hence some athletes may still enjoy their sports but choose not to continue at that time. In contrast, the benefits of staying involved in sport (e.g., physical fitness) for some athletes may be outweighed by the competitive emphasis of the program, an overly aggressive or negative coach, or lack of success. In such cases the athlete may experience negative affect and lose all interest in sport, never to participate again.

Children for the most part select activities they think they are reasonably good at; therefore researchers and practitioners should anticipate a certain degree of sampling to occur with young athletes (8). Furthermore, moving from one activity to another may reflect a normal trial-and-error sampling that children do, all in the process of growing up (2, 13). The turning point in participation, however, may occur when athletes decide they have reached their peak in a particular sport and that future success is unlikely. Orlick (7), for example, indicated that children were well aware of the fact they had to be *good* to make the team or play on a regular basis. Moreover, 75% of the nonparticipants thought they were *not good enough* to make the team, but would go out if they knew they would make the squad. Unfortunately, as athletes progress through the various levels of sport involvement (i.e., youth sport, which has enough teams for all the kids who sign up, to junior high and high school sports, which have only a certain number of slots available on the team) their exit from sport may be earlier than anticipated. These points of transitions may in fact account for the greatest decline in sport participation.

Having FUN is Pivotal

The second finding was that sport involvement must be FUN—I tend to agree! The problem is in defining the term sufficiently. In the AFA report (1), fun was defined “as the quest for the balance between challenge and skill. If they are relatively in balance, enjoyment results” and “the best challenges and greatest rewards in sports are intrinsic” (p. 5). This is achieved by having athletes set personal performance goals as opposed to outcome goals because performance

goals are within their control and based on their own previous standards for success. If only involvement in sport were that simple!

Unfortunately, the structure of sport (I don't necessarily endorse the structure) is such that only the strong survive. Many teenagers get involved in sport to have fun and be with their friends (9, 10). But as they continue their involvement, a greater demand (perceived or real) is placed on winning games and championships. Soon summers are spent attending sport camps to improve skills, game strategies, and/or off-season conditioning sessions; the sport they became involved in to have fun is now a full-time job. When the season arrives, marginal athletes find themselves "riding the pine" or being cut so that the more skilled athletes can contribute to the team's success.

For some, this lack of playing time makes it less fun, leading to frustration and possible withdrawal. For others, who focus on skill development, the lack of playing time may do little to alter their enjoyment in sport if they are reaching their goals. Thus coaches should focus on getting their athletes to set performance goals for personal improvement. Furthermore, parents and administrators need to support coaches in developmental programs that focus on improvement rather than winning. If we take the time to measure success via skill improvement, I believe winning will take care of itself and children will have a lot more FUN!

Winning Appears Low on the List

In most of the research conducted to date, winning has always been rated as a less important reason for participation than "to have fun," "to improve skills," "be with friends," and "fitness benefits" (9, 10); hence I was not surprised by this finding. The problem I foresee is how to convey such a finding to those individuals (coaches, parents, administrators) who can make a difference in the present structure of sport.

This finding may be age related. For the younger age groups, many organizations have gone to a structure of not keeping score or standings and establishing minimum playing time requirements for all athletes. However, as athletes move from these introductory programs to higher levels of competition and interscholastic sports, winning may become more important. Winning at these levels is assessed by going to tournaments, championships, coaches keeping their jobs, travel, and attainment of external rewards. For some individuals, this becomes paramount in their quest for success.

Unfortunately, in most situations winning is equated with success. Programs, coaches, and teams are only successful if they have a winning season. If there were more of an effort to set personal and team performance goals, more programs would experience success. Teams taking the floor against stronger opponents often appear defeated within minutes because success is only measured by the outcome of the contest. Coaches need to focus on performance rather than outcome to measure their team's real success. Of course this would take a strong commitment from the administration as well as educating parents and the public. Coaches should not lose their jobs if they don't win, as long as they are providing a good atmosphere for their athletes to succeed. Unfortunately, the opposite is too often the case!

Types of Participants

The fourth finding highlighted in the AFA report indicated that athletes have different motivations for sport participation. The report identifies three groups of participants: (a) reluctant participants who participated in sport because they felt they had to due to outside pressures (e.g., their friends were doing it), (b) image-conscious socializers who were concerned about the rewards or approval of others (e.g., being good, being popular, looking good), and (c) competence-oriented youths who were concerned primarily with improving their skills. The report did not indicate how these categories were determined but suggested that the first two types of participants are most likely to withdraw from sport. This indicates that youths who focus on external reasons for participation are more likely to withdraw from sport than those who get involved for skill improvement.

These types of participant categories fall in line with the previous research conducted on participation motivation (4, 5, 13). Gould and Horn (4) suggest that young athletes have a number of diverse reasons for participating in sport. Gaining an understanding of these different reasons may in fact prevent some individuals from dropping out of sport altogether.

Research (6, 13) conducted on attrition in sport would indicate that drop-outs also fit into various categories based on reasons for dropping out of sport. Klint and Weiss (6), for example, identified different types of dropouts: (a) the reluctant dropout, forced out because of injury or cost of program; (b) the voluntary dropout, who wanted to sample other sports or situations but was not necessarily unhappy in the present situation; and (c) the resistant dropout, who still valued sport participation but was currently unhappy in his or her present situation (e.g., the costs outweighed the benefits of being involved).

Hence, understanding what motivates children to participate in sport as well as drop out of sport could have profound effects on how it is structured. Coaches, parents, and administrators could then structure the sport environment to meet the needs of those involved, emphasizing skill improvement and matching the skill level of the youngster with appropriate demands to enhance performance and fun.

Concluding Remarks

The AFA report has provided a tool to convey to individuals involved in organized sport that we need to take a serious look at our product. If our goal is to keep youngsters active and involved in sport, we had better meet their needs. That is, from the pee-wee leagues to the high school gymnasiums, an effort should be made to de-emphasize winning and encourage skill development in our programs.

It is my contention that we have created an elitist system—there are only a few spots available for individuals who are good enough to play their sport. One by one, children are left with no program to participate in because they just aren't good enough. Budget crunches and facility scheduling have all but eliminated intramural programs in which children could have fun and improve their skills without worry of elimination. High school sports have become big business for

a select few. Why should we be surprised that less than 21% of the high school students are involved in one school sport (1)? So the real question becomes, Does participation decline or are there just fewer places for teenagers and preteens to play?

Another issue not raised in this report focuses on the overemphasis on specialization. Children are beginning to specialize in one sport or another in hopes of attaining a scholarship to college, playing professional ball, or because of a coach's demands. This has led to overuse injuries and declining participation in various programs. Off-season conditioning has made it virtually impossible for some athletes to participate in more than one sport; hence they are considered a dropout in the other program. In fact, I have seen coaches use scare tactics to keep athletes involved in their program, and their program only! What has happened to the multisport athlete?

When I was coaching in high school, I remember one athlete in particular who participated in three sports: basketball, volleyball, and track and field. When I asked why she participated in each of these sports, she said, "I play basketball because I am good at it," "I play volleyball because I want to be with my friends," and "Track and field because there isn't anything else to do after school." She was not an outstanding athlete but had a great attitude. This has always stayed in my mind as I continue to research sport participation and withdrawal.

I must say, however, that the sport environment does not by itself contribute to participation and withdrawal; parents and other athletes often influence whether an athlete remains involved in sport. Some athletes are not willing to commit to programs or put forth effort to succeed. They often blame poor coaching (not that it doesn't exist) for their failure when in fact they did not want to work hard to improve. Parents sometimes get coaches fired because they didn't win enough games or played favorites; or parents write anonymous letters to coaches asking them to resign.

If organized sport is to survive and meet the needs of the individuals involved at all levels, more emphasis should be placed on skill development, both physical and social. Children at all ages should be encouraged to participate. Then sport administrators should do everything they can to provide a healthy sport environment for all who want to play, irrespective of ability. They should encourage coaches to attend coaching clinics or in-service workshops that focus not only on sport-specific skills but also convey knowledge about the sport sciences (e.g., sport philosophy, sport psychology, sport physiology, biomechanics, sport medicine, and sport management). Special emphasis should be placed on communication skills (1). We must remember, however, that not every child is going to be an athlete, but we can at least let him or her play sports.

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Author Note

¹ This study was conducted in 1987 by Martha E. Ewing and Vern Seefeldt of the Youth Sports Institute at Michigan State University. The results compiled from over 10,000 students' questionnaires were summarized and reported to the AFA in 1988. Further analyses were conducted by Sophisticated Data Research, Inc., in 1989. Dr. Steve Danish of the Psychology Department at the Virginia Commonwealth University provided further interpretations of the data analyses. Details from this study are available from the Athletic Footwear Association, 200 Castlewood Drive, North Palm Beach, FL 33408.