

Coaching high school athletes in Connecticut: Evaluation of a psychosocial coaching training program

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**Socio-cultural
Session 9**

**Thursday, May 29, 2008
4:00 PM - 5:00 PM**

**Poster
Abstract 366**

Over 100,000 Connecticut high school students participated in interscholastic sports in 2005-2006 (National Federation of State High Schools, 2007). Similar to young people across the country, of all the structured voluntary activities available, Connecticut youth devote a majority of their time to organized sports (Larson & Verma, 1999). Multiple benefits are associated with participation in organized sports, including the physiological benefits of physical activity, positive academic outcomes including higher grade point averages, reduced dropout rate, enhanced affinity for school, and greater odds of attending college (Conroy & Coatsworth, 2006).

In addition, there are some negative implications associated with participation in organized sports. The jock identity is described as an identity embraced by those with a dominant vision of masculinity, including messages that valorize toughness, violence, recklessness, and the subordination of women (Miller, Melnick, Farrell, Sabo, & Barnes, 2006). Adoption of a jock identity is associated with binge drinking (Miller, Melnick, Barnes, Farrell, & Sabo, 2005) for both genders and increased sexual risk taking for males (Miller, Hoffman, Barnes, Farrell, Sabo, & Melnick, 2003). Adoption of the jock identity has also been linked to lower academic outcomes, specifically for Black male athletes, and increased misconduct in school, including skipping school, cutting classes and being sent to the principal's office for all athletes ascribing to the jock identity (Miller et al., 2005). Given the negative implications associated with playing sports and development of a jock identity, it is important for those providing sports opportunities for adolescents, specifically for adolescent boys, to find ways to continue to encourage sport participation, while also discouraging the development of a jock identity (Miller et al., 2006).

Coaches have the most contact and therefore the most influence on adolescents participating in sports programs (Conroy & Coatsworth, 2006). A coach's influence can help to dissuade the development of the jock identity. In addition, coaches have significant impacts on young athletes' self-concept, motivation, and affective outcomes in sports (Coatsworth & Conroy, 2006; Conroy, Kaye, & Coatsworth, 2006; Smoll, Smith, Barnett, & Everett, 1993). Young athletes often consider their coaches to be experts and subsequently influential adults. As a result of the significant interaction time and perceived influence coaches have on young athletes, training coaches in methods to increase positive behaviors and decrease other more potential detrimental behaviors can have an impact on young athletes' participation experiences. In fact, these methods and their application may serve to enhance athletes' overall development (Conroy & Coatsworth, 2006). Training coaches to be aware of the development of a jock identity, and how to prevent or discourage development of such an identity, could have a significant positive influence on young athletes.

Psychosocial coach training programs are based on principles that emphasize the role of sport in youth development. In addition, these programs provide coaches with behavioral methods for promoting evaluations of success/failure among youth, guidelines for successful communication between coaches and athletes, and suggestions for addressing some of the common problems coaches face in youth sport (Conroy & Coatsworth, 2004). "Coaching for Life: Building Men and Women for Others" is a psychosocial coach training program developed by Coach Joe Ehrmann that strives "to re-define coaching and reframe sport as an educational activity that has the potential to develop and express moral virtue, character, community, and the self-discovery of potential and purpose" (Ehrmann, n.d.). Therefore, the first purpose of the proposed research project was to evaluate the perception of the Coaching for Life program (CFL), and the perceived impacts the CFL program may have on coaching behaviors of select high school coaches from the state of Connecticut.

Methods: To evaluate the perceptions of and the potential impacts of the CFL program data have been collected and will continue to be collected during individual interviews with coaches following the CFL training. Semi-structured interviews with four coaches (n = 4) following the fall sport season CFL training were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Four additional coaches (n = 4) will be interviewed following the spring sport season CFL training. The transcribed data will then be analyzed using NVIVO qualitative analysis software. Data will be coded to identify major themes emerging from coaches' perceptions of and experiences with the Coaching for Life Program.

Significance of the research: Participation in organized sports provides many positive benefits for adolescents. However, there are associated negative outcomes that can result from development of a jock identity when participating in organized sports. Coaches have significant impact on the overall development of young athletes in sports; it is imperative that coaches become

2008 North American Society for Sport Management Conference (NASSM 2008)

properly trained in appropriate instructional skill development for young athletes, but also trained in how to positively impact psychosocial development of young athletes. The Coaching for Life program provides coaches the training necessary to provide an optimal environment for the psychosocial development of their players.

Coaching education and training has not been fully implemented across all youth sport settings (Hedstrom & Gould, 2004). There is a clear need to implement effective coach training programs at the youth sport level, as such training programs have demonstrated positive outcomes for children, including decreased attrition from youth sports, higher levels of enjoyment, higher motivation to participate, and increased self-esteem (Hestrom & Gould, 2004). The success of the Coaching for Life program in the state of Connecticut could provide a nationwide model for coach effectiveness training programs.