Retaining Youth Baseball Players: A National Examination of Participation Motivations from Multiple Perspectives

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Retaining youth athletes and more specifically youth baseball players has become a major concern for sport administrators in recent years (Babe Ruth Baseball League, 2010; Ferreira & Armstrong, 2002; Gaskin & Garland, 2005; NSGA, 2009). For instance, according to the National Sporting Goods Association (NSGA) 2010, the number of U.S. baseball participants has declined from 15.9 million in 2005 to 11.5 million in 2009. Retaining youth baseball players is particularly important since approximately 58% of all U.S. baseball participants are between the ages of seven and 17. Youth baseball participation has decreased by over 20% in the past decade and this downward participation trend has sport administrators worried that America’s pastime may be fighting for an increasingly smaller portion of the youth sport market share (Babe Ruth Baseball League, 2010; SGMA, 2010).

Despite this national decline in youth baseball participation, few researchers have examined youth sport participation motivations from multiple perspectives. Youth sport researchers have effectively documented parent and peer involvement in the socialization process linked to sport participation motivations (Brustad, 1992; Harter, 1982; Weiss & Chaumeton, 1992). In other words, parents and friends, through the process of socialization, have been shown to significantly influence a child’s propensity to play a sport. However, few studies have examined the potential differences in perceived participation motivation perceptions between parents, coaches, and youth sport participants (Burton & Martens, 1986; Clews & Gross, 1995; Ferreira & Armstrong, 2002; Gaskin & Garland, 2005).

Previous research has found differences in perceived motivations for youth sport participants between parents and youth athletes (Brustad, 1992; Burton & Martens, 1986; Weiss & Chaumeton, 1992). For instance, Burton and Martens (1986) found that youth wrestling dropouts were interested in other activities and wrestling was no longer fun for them, but their parents perceived that they were simply not motivated to compete in organized sports. It should also be noted that very little research exists that has examined parental, coach, and youth athlete participation motivation perceptions in the same study.

Utilizing Survey Monkey computer software, all of the youth baseball coaches, players, and parents of players currently registered with one of the largest U.S. amateur baseball coaching associations will be surveyed via email. The membership of the organization examined in this study consists of approximately 6,000 coaches and 1,000,000 players aged 4-19 in all 50 states. For the purpose of this study, college level coaches and players will be excluded and only coaches, players, and parents with email addresses on file with the organization will be contacted and included in the study (approximately 3,500 coaches and 12,000 players and parents). No inducements will be given to complete the survey, but a letter outlining the importance of the study from the president of the baseball organization will be used to increase interest and response rate.

The survey includes various demographic questions and the Participation Motivation Questionnaire (PMQ) (Gaskin & Garland, 2005; Gill, et al, 1983). The PMQ consists of 30 potential participation motives and ask participants to rate the importance of each motive with a Likert type scale (one being not at all important and five being extremely important). This instrument has been previously tested and proven reliable and valid in a variety of research settings. The survey was designed to answer the following research question: Are there significant differences in perceived youth baseball participation motivations (team, extrinsic rewards, competition, fitness, mastery, and being active) among the various stakeholders (coaches, parents, and youth baseball players)?

Data will be collected from all of the coaches, parents of kids playing baseball for the aforementioned organization and the children playing the sport. Data collection will use modified versions of the PMQ and will be delivered via email utilizing the parental email addresses supplied by the youth baseball organization. Three versions of the PMQ will be used and the language in each item will be changed slightly in order to be tailored for each stakeholder group. The modified surveys also ask the children to identify their playing status (currently playing, quit playing, or thinking about trying other sports/activities). This study will help demonstrate if there are significant differences in participation motivation perceptions between the various stakeholders involved in youth baseball.
Data will be analyzed utilizing SPSS version 16.0 and descriptive data will be reported as mean scores, frequencies, and percentages. In order to answer the research question, additive composite scores will be created for each motivation domain (team, extrinsic rewards, competition, fitness, mastery, and being active) of the PMQ and a Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) comparing mean differences in perceived youth baseball motivations among the various stakeholder groups (coaches, parents, and youth athletes) will be conducted. Post-hoc analyses will also be conducted where significance is found and the results reported accordingly.

This study provides a comprehensive, national picture of participation motivations in youth baseball and adds to the literature by comparing and contrasting motivation perceptions among stakeholder groups. The results of this study will provide practical information for youth baseball organizations and help youth baseball administrators make informed decisions regarding future activities related to increasing participation. For instance, if competition is found to be significantly less important to the children than the parents or coaches it may be helpful to de-emphasize competition. Overall, this study is an important addition to the youth sport motivation literature and will provide data for subsequent studies.