Adolescent Withdrawal from Sport Participation: Recognition of the Psychosocial, Psychological, and Physiological Motivation Factors and Their Implications

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The highest dropout rate in youth sport is early adolescence, 11-15 years of age (Butcher, Linder, & Johns, 2002; Linder, Butcher, & Johns 1994; Petlichkoff, 1996). When young people drop out of sport, there are negative consequences not only for their own physical and psychological health, but for the sport industry, as a significant current and future participant segment is simply lost (cf. Green, 2005; Wall & Côté, 2007). Thus, there is a clear need to understand why this group drops out of sport and how they can be retained. This conceptual study examines the contextual and psychological reasons for sport withdrawal in this age group, with a particular emphasis on developmental factors that are particular to this lifestyle. Such an understanding is crucial for sport managers as they seek to reduce the dramatic dropout rate and attract this sport participation segment.

A number of models propose contextual or “external” factors as reasons for children’s withdrawal. Some of these reasons include coaching conflicts (Barnett, Smoll, & Smith 1992; Molerino, Salguero, Tuero, Alvarez & Márquez, 1992), poor program design (Gillard, & Witt, 2008; Green, 2005), parental pressures (Ferreira, & Armstrong 2002), and peer pressures (Patrick, Ryan, Alfeld-Liro, Fredricks, Hruda, & Eccles, 1999). As an example, work based on Duda’s (2001) Achievement Goal Theory, Boiché & Sarrazin (2009) argue, “This model proposes that the motivational climate provided may impact the goal pursued by individuals and hence their persistence” (p. 10). Green’s (2005) sport development model also suggests that external factors like sport program availability and design can strongly impact sport entry and retention decisions.

Some theoretical models also include an examination of the “internal” reasons for withdrawal, including intrinsic motivation (e.g., Sport Commitment Model; Carpenter, Scal, Simons, & Lobel, 1993). These models suggest that the degree of satisfaction, absence of attractive alternatives, and resources already invested play an integral part in whether an athlete continues to participate, or withdraws from sport altogether.

The problem with existing models is that they are often based on a negative assumption that poorly executed external factors; (and the intrinsic motivators affected by such factors), are the sole influence on adolescent sport dropout. It is possible that not all sport withdrawal is a negative decision and could well be a normal part of adolescent development. Piaget’s formal operations stage (11-12 years of age) recognizes this period in a child’s development as a time where adolescents begin “to achieve a broad overview, to plan in considerable detail what they are going to do, and to interpret whatever they do within the total context” and “adolescents begin to see the particular reality in which they live as only one of several imaginable realities” (Siegler, 1986, p. 37).

A number of studies have shown that during this particular life-stage, changes in the developmental process for the adolescent are numerous (Siegler, 1986; Selma, Levitt, & Schultz, 1997). For instance, relationship development at this time is extremely complex because maturation achievement and advanced cognitive thought varies from child to child. Choosing relationships and activities, including sport, now is based more on weighing the potential costs against the perceived rewards, instead of simply choosing because no other alternatives are known to exist.

Likewise, in a model of youth sport, Jean Côté recognized the complexity of this maturation in adolescence by devoting two of his four stages in his sport participation model to this phenomenon—specialization years (13-15), and recreation years (13+)—clearly indicating the new ability to interpret and execute, based on cognitive logic and concrete thought (Wall & Côté, 2007). The significance here is, that across different academia research areas, but under the same theoretical context, the adolescent age group is clearly different than younger children, making models of adolescent sport participation distinct from both children’s and adult models.

While this study is still in progress, there are at least two implications that are emerging. First is that adolescent developmental models make it clear that adolescents are developing the ability to make their own sport choices. The adolescent becomes the decision-maker, taking on the role previously held by the parent or guardian. Therefore,
sport program design decisions must appeal to the adolescent and his/her needs, rather than those of the parents. Another implication is that sport programs that appeal to different commitment levels (e.g., intramurals) may be an emergent avenue for retaining sport participants, as adolescents appear to be placing sport within a wider variety of relationship and activity choices.

As this conceptual work develops, the focus on internal, developmentally appropriate reasons for youth sport dropout will add theoretical and practical insights that will work toward attracting and retaining this sizeable and important participant base.