When Mastery Gets in the Way of Winning: Examining Coaches’ Management of Parental Psychology in Youth Sport Development Settings

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The purpose of this research is to gain an empirical understanding of the constraints faced by youth sport organizations with respect to managing parent psychology. Through adopting an action research framework, this research endeavors to integrate and synthesize the perceptions of one of the sets of integral adult stakeholders (coaches) to address our central research question: What steps can organizations take in training coaches to help parents be better equipped to understand the developmental benefits of a pedagogical approach committed to long-term mastery over short-term scoreboard results?

Since the mid-Twentieth century, youth sports increasingly have shifted toward a model that emphasizes adult-led, organized play (Bowers & Hunt, 2011). As a result, the contemporary iteration of youth sport could not be implemented and executed without adults, whose roles as coaches, administrators, and parents make them an indispensable component of the youth sport delivery equation (Bowers, Chalip, & Green, 2011). Although the management of the youth sport experience by adults is pragmatic, if not inescapable, it is not without its inherent challenges. Parents often impose professionalized models of development and performance evaluation that are more aligned with the professional sports that they consume through media than with developmentally- and pedagogically-appropriate training. With respect to the psychological training of youth athletes, the evaluative emphasis of many parents that weight heavily scoreboard outcomes has the potential to undermine the development of a mastery orientation in the child, encouraging instead the development of an ego orientation. Whereas mastery-oriented children tend to perceive success when they have learned a new task, experienced self-improvement in their skills, or played with their utmost effort, ego-oriented children are far more likely to only perceive success when they have demonstrated superiority - at whatever cost - to their opponents (Cumming et al., 2007). Coaches and adults who encourage children to create a mastery-involving motivational climate, as opposed to an ego-involving climate, foster an environment associated with a number of positive outcomes for the child’s development: greater sport enjoyment and intrinsic motivation (Chi, 2004), as well as a more salient belief that effort is essential to success (Treasure & Roberts, 1998). In addition, children who develop a mastery orientation are also more likely to develop the types of adaptive achievement behaviors required of successful long-term athletes, such as striving for challenging goals and persisting in the face of difficulty or failure (Duda & Hall, 2001). Yet, in spite of the importance of adopting a process-focused mastery orientation for training youth athletes, youth sport programs attempting to compromise the outcome-oriented model in an effort to shift the emphasis to individual development and mastery are often met with skepticism about their legitimacy, and tend to face intense social pressure to conform to the more pervasive models of traditional youth sport (Green, 1997).

Although the work of Chalip and Green (1998) offers a conceptual framework for considering the challenges faced by youth sport programs that adopt more child-centered approaches, the present literature has done little to extend this line of research into the practical steps of managing parent psychology in a youth sport setting. Recently, Smoll, Cumming, and Smith (2011) took a productive step by consolidating existing research into a concise practical guide for parents and coaches, but they provide guidelines that may remain too abstract to assist youth sport organizations in preparing coaches for the real complexities of the coach-parent-athlete dynamic. For those administrators and coaches who are invested in developing youth athletes through empirically- and pedagogically-sound approaches that foster a mastery orientation over “scoreboard-watching,” the pressure to conform to mainstream coaching and programming models can be nearly prohibitive from a business standpoint. Therefore, this research project endeavors to understand and articulate the psychological constraints that mitigate parental acceptance of mastery-oriented youth sport programming. It also endeavors to understand and evaluate the current tactics employed by an organization (and its coaches) to promote parental acceptance. The findings have the potential to make a substantive contribution to enabling youth sport organizations to more sustainably pursue development models capable of producing better-trained and more well-adjusted youth athletes.
This study is being conducted as an action research investigation, which emphasizes “the study of a social situation with a view to improving the quality of action within it” (Elliott, 1991, p. 69). The realm of action research can trace its origins back to the work of Lewin (1946), and offers a methodological framework for generating theory through iterative practical interventions. According to Carr and Kemmis (1986), action research is a “self-reflective spiral” in which the researcher plans, acts, observes, and reflects on interventions designed to precipitate some type of incremental social change. Recently, sport management researchers have identified the potential relevance of incorporating action research methodologies into sport settings (Frisby, Reid, Miller, & Hoeber, 2005) - even youth sport settings (Green, 1997). In the present study, action research offers an appropriate framework to employ a qualitative investigation to understand and inform what is a complex social interdependence between coaches, parents, and children within youth sport settings. As a methodological lens, action research allows for a fluid and dynamic relationship between the participant input and the development of steps to create a more responsive and effective system for addressing organizational issues related to managing parent psychology. As a result, the data derived from the initial analyses will serve as a basis for “action” as the organization attempts to redress any disconnect between parent perceptions and the development of their children as athletes.

To accommodate deviations in responses and to analyze the data in a manner that reflects an appreciation for the usefulness of participant responses that fall outside of a semi-structured interview guide’s parameters, data analysis will be inductive in nature (cf. Munhall, 2007). Following transcription of the interviews and importing the resultant raw data into NVivo 9, the iterative data analysis will begin with line-by-line coding (cf. Saldaña, 2009). After the delineation of first-order constructs through the line-by-line coding, second-order constructs will be derived from the initial inductive coding, followed by the grouping of these constructs into sub-themes. These sub-themes will then be consolidated and compared across the coach sample; the sub-themes will be condensed into broader themes that capture the major findings to emerge from this component of the research project. The synthesized findings will be situated within the literature to determine opportunities for the organization to adopt relevant existing empirical approaches to their parent management strategy and to determine where new approaches may need to be developed. The overall findings and implications will then be discussed with the organization, with strategies being formulated to integrate new approaches to parent management. The researchers will also assist the organization with the implementation and evaluation of any adopted approaches. By actively ascertaining qualitative feedback from coaches, this research aims to identify the salient psychological aspects of the adult instructor experience in a youth sports setting. Moreover, this research also takes steps to assist the organization in developing and implementing tactics to ameliorate the barriers to acceptance and adoption that are identified by both the coach and parent study participants. Although the findings are particular to the present research context, they may provide an empirical basis upon which to develop actionable steps that youth sport organizations can take to train coaches to manage the psychology of parents whose children participate in their sport programs. This proactive management can, in turn, potentially foster a youth sport developmental model that better enables the creation of a mastery-oriented motivational climate for the child participants.