Aging and Sport Participation: Exploring the Influence of Addiction to Sport

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There is considerable evidence that sport and other physical activity provides health and wellness benefits, yet despite this, even cross-culturally, most adults do not meet governmental health standards for an active lifestyle. As one ages, physical activity continues to decline and worsen. Research has shown that life has clear stages that have the potential to limit capacity for physical activity and participation in sport (see Cerin, Leslie, Sugiyama, & Owen, 2010). For example, many do not adhere to an active lifestyle that includes sport for a wide variety of reasons including but not limited to time, no access, lack of social interaction, and cost (Allendar, Cowburn, and Foster, 2006). Sport can provide a solution by allowing adults socialization opportunities with like-minded athletes, competition outlets, and the ability to master new skills in a challenging environment (Berg, Warner, & Das, 2014).

Despite life’s barriers, many individuals’ involvement in sport endures through every life stage. While participation might change, it continues. What drives these individuals to persevere when others succumb to barriers? Researchers have explored motivation and barriers for sport participation (Aicher & Newland, 2017; Allendar, et al., 2006), meaning (Jacobs, Newland, & Green, 2016) and enduring involvement (Partington et al., 2005), but one gap in the literature is how addiction to sport participation might play a role in enduring involvement. Addiction is often explored in negative situations and environments (Youngman & Simpson, 2014). But, does addiction have to lead to negative outcomes? How does addiction influence current participation? Can it predict enduring involvement? To determine patterns, the researchers used Levinson’s (1986) model, which provides a clear distinction of developmental sequences of age, to examine sport at various moments in an individual’s life: adolescence (up to 22), early adulthood (17-45), middle adulthood (40-65) and adulthood (60+). This study outlines participation patterns and the impact of life cycle on participation, but also develops a stronger understanding of the role addiction plays in enduring involvement. Therefore, this exploratory study examines sport induced outcomes that include: enduring involvement, motives to participate, meaning of sport, and addiction to sport in the lives of adults. The aim is to develop an understanding of the lifelong career progression of athletes to better inform management decisions on access and programming. The following research questions drive this investigation:

(1) Does motivation, enduring involvement, meaning, and addiction differentiate across the lifespan?

(2) Do meaning, motivation, involvement, and addiction vary as a function of sport participation pattern over the lifespan?

(3) Does an individual’s motivation, enduring involvement, and meaning associated with their sport participation predict their level of addiction?

(4) Do individuals with higher levels of addiction possess greater enduring involvement or effect their highest level achieved?

Method
Following IRB approval, over 1,000 active sport participants competing in a wide variety of sports were asked to complete a 15-minute survey about their past and current sport participation. The web-based questionnaire was distributed in partnership with several sport organizations across a variety of sports to enhance participation rates. Using previous research, questionnaire items pertained to sport behavior including the meaning of sport (Jacobs, Newland, & Green, 2016; Morgan & Farsides, 2009), enduring involvement in sport (Kyle et al., 2007), addiction to sport (Lichtenstein, et al., 2014), and motivation (Pelletier et al., 2013). In addition, we collected demographic information, sport participation data (hours trained, competitive level, skill level, sport type) for comparative purposes.
Analysis
Given this research is currently in data collection, the following analyses will occur shortly. Statistics will be calculated for demographic information. Measures for meaning, involvement, addiction, and motivation will be tested for internal consistency using Cronbach’s alpha. Factor analysis with principal components extractions will be used to determine any underlying dimensions. Groups will be identified based on patterns of sport participation. Group differences will then be tested for meaning, involvement, addiction, and motivation using MANCOVA. Univariate tests and marginal means will be used to determine what was affected by group membership as well as the directions of such effects. Finally, regression will be used to explore if addiction predicts enduring involvement or higher skill levels.

Results And Discussion
There are several expected outcomes. Based on earlier research (Jacobs, Newland, & Green, 2016), we do expect to see three types of adult athletes emerge from the sport participation pattern data: continuous (athletes who continue to participate in the sport through the lifespan), intermittent (athletes who played intermittently either by dropping and returning or picking up sport later in adulthood), and terminated (athletes who played sport at one point in life, but stopped in adulthood). It is expected that the three types of athletes will report different levels of motivation, meaning, involvement and addiction as a function of highest level achieved, athlete type, and involvement in sport. Ultimately, the findings may allow practitioners to develop programming that better serves the interests and needs of adult athletes. If we can better understand patterns of participation across the lifespan – and how meaning, involvement, motivation, and addiction might change over time – then perhaps sport organizations can develop more effective tools to attract participants and retain them as they age. A full discussion of the results and implications for management will be provided in the presentation.