The Impact of Sport Development-Related Factors on Psychosocial Well-Being of High School Athletes

Matthew Bowers, University of Texas at Austin
Kyungun (Ryan) Kim, University of Central Missouri

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Participation in team sports has been declining recently. In one year alone, participation among 6-17 year-olds dropped from 54% to 50% (SFIA Team Sports Report, 2013). As sport participation rates decline, sport managers face the compounding challenge that youth and school-age sports remain largely under-explained from an empirical standpoint. So, as children leave sport, sport managers do not even have a clear understanding of the reasons why or the opportunity costs associated with participating in sport or not. Moreover, in the instances where youth and adolescents have been studied, the emphasis has tended to be on the outcomes of participation, with little attention paid to the nature of the experiences (cf., Bowers & Green, 2013). Sport providers and policymakers want to reverse these losses—and promote the health of children—but need guidance on where to focus efforts so their organizations can improve policies and practices and create new partnerships, as well as help consider broader sport development implications.

The present study is a spin-off of a larger, first-of-its-kind attempt by multiple researchers working with multiple partnering organizations to develop an holistic system to assess how the 10 most popular boys and girls high school sports in the United States contribute to an holistic definition of health (physical activity, safety/injury, psychosocial) for their participants. This smaller branch of the broader study explores psychosocial well-being by utilizing a slightly modified version of the short-form Youth Experiences Scale for Sport (YES-S) (Sullivan, Laforge-MacKenzie, & Marini, 2015). The YES-S is a five-factor instrument designed to measure Positive Youth Development (PYD) through tangible, experience-focused items that ask respondents to assess on a four-point scale how often an experience has occurred while playing sports. After adding four questions and one dimension to the survey in order to more directly ask respondents to reflect on health-related experiences, we also supplemented the YES-S with demographic and sport development-specific questions.

Working through approved access from state high school associations, we amassed 1,290 usable surveys. Using ordinary least squares regression analysis (and controlling for age, gender, race, and region), we observed a number of significant results with clear sport development-related implications. While the presentation will address in more depth the overall findings, some of the notable findings indicated that late-specializing athletes reported significantly less frequent negative experiences than early-specializing athletes (M=1.44***), extreme (4+) multisport athletes reported significantly higher experiences related to cognitive skill development than single-sport athletes (M=2.92**), and, perhaps most controversially, athletes who participated in their primary sport 10-12 months/year had significantly higher scores across multiple YES-S categories relative to athletes who participate less, including Overall YES-S (M=16.17**).

Through exploring the experience of high school athletes and connecting those experiences with sport-specific and demographic data, we hope to help sport providers and policymakers have a better understanding of the impact that sport participation has on psychosocial well-being. Through this better understanding, we may be able to design sport experiences that create the experiences that will provide participants with better overall value and that could counteract declining participation rates.