Causes and Consequences of Fanship among Adolescent Female Football Players

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There has been substantial interest in the formation of sport fanship and the effects that fanship can have. Research demonstrates that fanship is learned through processes of socialization (Gantz, Fingerhut, & Nadorf, 2012), and that family and friends play key roles (Kolbe & James, 2000; Greenwood, Kanters, & Casper, 2006). Other work shows that social support from family (Beets, Cardinal, & Alderman, 2010) and friends (Sheridan, Coffee, & Lavallee, 2014) while playing sport affects ongoing attitudes and participation intensity, especially for adolescent girls (Laird, Fawkner, Kelly, McNamee, & Niven, 2016).

Elsewhere, it has also been suggested that playing sports might help to drive fanship in sports, although studies in several countries have failed to find such an effect (Chalip, 2016). That could be because the psycho-social experience of sport participation depends on social support, which might then flow to fanship. That possibility remains to be tested.

There has been ample work on the effects of fanship (Wann, Melnick, Russell, & Pease, 2001), but that work has not examined whether fanship might drive athletes’ interest in upward transitions. Motivating athlete transitions is a key task for sport development (Green, 2005). Since fanship indicates interest in a sport, it could affect athletes’ future plans.

This study tests the relationships suggested above.

Female, HS flag-football players (N=161) completed questionnaires measuring: support for football participation, sport participation history, football fanship, and interest in playing women’s tackle football. Nine items representing two factors (family support, friends’ support) were measured on a 3- pt scale from 1= against me playing to 3= very supportive. Factor scores were used in further analyses. Frequency of pick-up football was measured from 1= rarely to 3= often. Players provided a history of their sport participation between the ages of 6 and 17. Data were collapsed to indicate players’ experience in recreation sport and travel sport. Three fanship items were measured on 5-pt Likert scales. The items represented a single fanship factor; factor scores were used in further analyses. A single Likert scale item measured interest in playing tackle football.

Data were analyzed via path analysis. Football fanship was regressed on family support, friend support, pick-up football, recreational sport, and travel sport. Items with non-significant betas were removed iteratively until all paths were significant. Pick-up football and both support variables predicted fanship: $R^2 = .14$, $F(3, 157) = 8.46$, $p < .001$. Future intentions were then regressed on fanship in block 1, followed by support and participation in block 2. The model was refined by removing non-significant pathways. The overall regression was significant: $R^2 = .11$, $F(3, 157) = 6.33$, $p < .001$. Fanship and recreational sport participation positively affected interest in playing tackle football, while travel sport had a negative effect. Fanship fully mediated the effects of social support.

Results suggest that social support conditions the degree to which playing a sport drives fanship, and that fanship can have a positive effect on athletes’ desire to transition upwards. Recreational play also encourages transition, but travel team experience has the reverse effect. Implications for theory and practice are discussed.