The Sporting Life: Athletic Activities During Early Adolescence

Carol E. Kirshnit, Mark Ham, and Maryse H. Richards

The decline in sports participation that begins in early adolescence has been well documented, and there has been considerable controversy regarding the reasons for this attrition. The present study addressed the attrition process by focusing on the subjective experience of sports as a function of grade, gender, and sport context. Following the procedures of the Experience Sampling Method, 401 5th-9th-grade boys and girls carried electronic pagers, similar to those worn by doctors, for one week, and filled out self-report forms on their activities and subjective states in response to signals received at random times. Older respondents spent less time in sports than their younger peers. This age difference was due primarily to a decline in informal sports participation, with less pronounced attrition from organized sports. Our findings suggest that the reasons for attrition from sport may be context specific. While informal sports were experienced more positively than gym class or organized sports, perceptions of skill were lowest during informal sports and declined with age. It seems youngsters stop participating in organized sports because these activities are less enjoyable to them, while attrition from informal sports is more performance based. Boys spent more time in sports than girls, and this difference was based primarily upon significant gender differences in informal sports participation. In spite of their differential rates of participation, boys and girls reported similar levels of affect, arousal, and skill during sports.

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1Staff Psychologist, Counseling Center, University of Illinois at Chicago. Received Ph.D. in psychology from Loyola University of Chicago. Current research interests include athletic involvement during early adolescence, body image, and adolescent mental health. To whom correspondence should be addressed at Counseling Center, Mail Code 609, 112 Administrative Services Bldg., 721 S. Ward St., Chicago, IL 60612.

2Graduate Student, Committee on Human Development, The University of Chicago. Current research interests are stress and coping during early adolescence, and the adaptive use of leisure time.

3Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, Loyola University of Chicago. Received Ph.D. from the Committee on Human Development at the University of Chicago. Current research interests include pubertal development, the precursors of eating disorders, and the effects of maternal employment of young adolescents.

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INTRODUCTION

Sports are considered to be some of the more constructive and enjoyable activities available to young adolescents. Conventional wisdom suggests that athletics build character, promote "healthy" competition, encourage teamwork, and provide youngsters with an area of instrumental achievement unavailable to the nonathletically inclined. The beneficial aspects of youth sport involvement include its association with positive feelings about one's body, and higher levels of self-esteem (Anthrop and Allison, 1983; Hall et al., 1986; Kirshnit et al., 1988; Snyder and Kivlin, 1975; Snyder and Spreitzer, 1976).

Given the many potential benefits derived through participation in athletic activities, it is disturbing to note that approximately 80% of all children drop out of organized sports programs between the ages of 12 and 17 years (Roberts and Kleiber, 1982; Seefeldt et al., 1978). In addition, attrition rates are much higher for girls than for boys, and girls tend to withdraw from athletic participation at earlier ages than boys (Brown, 1985; Butcher, 1985).

The few studies that have attempted to understand why so many children are dropping out of sports during the early teen years have relied primarily upon retrospective self-reports of older adolescents and adults, rather than studying youngsters while the attrition process is taking place (Balazs, 1975; Brown, 1985; Burton and Martens, 1986). Moreover, few studies have examined the subjective experience of sports or the differing contexts within which sports are played. In this paper, we address the question of attrition by looking at subjective experience during sport as a function of context, age, and gender.

Studies of young athletes' motives for dropping out of sports have indicated that youngsters discontinue their involvement in sports for one of two major reasons. The first of these involves interest in and conflicts with other activities (Gould et al., 1982; Pooley, 1981; Sapp and Haubenstricker, 1978). This school of thought is based on the idea that there is a finite amount of leisure time available to youngsters, and with increasing age, greater options and demands on how to utilize this free time. From this perspective, attrition from sport is due to youngsters' opting to pursue nonathletic forms of leisure and not having enough free time remaining to participate in sports.

In contrast to the idea of time conflicts and constraints, the second major explanation for youngsters' attrition from sport emphasizes the negative and overly professionalized qualities of organized youth sports programs, including lack of playing time, lack of success, little skill improvement, high pressure to perform or win, and dislike of the coach (Gould and Horn, 1984; Orlick, 1974). Very little research, however, has focused on sports outside...