Understanding Adolescents’ Positive and Negative Developmental Experiences in Sport

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The purpose of this study was to gain understanding of adolescents’ positive and negative developmental experiences in sport. Twenty-two purposefully sampled adolescent competitive swimmers participated in a semistructured qualitative interview. Content analysis led to the organization of meaning units into themes and categories (Patton, 2002). Athletes suggested their sport involvement facilitated many positive developmental experiences (i.e., related to challenge, meaningful adult and peer relationships, a sense of community, and other life experiences) and some negative developmental experiences (i.e., related to poor coach relationships, negative peer influences, parent pressure, and the challenging psychological environment of competitive sport). Findings underline the important roles of sport programmers, clubs, coaches, and parents in facilitating youths’ positive developmental experiences in sport, while highlighting numerous important directions for future research. Implications for coach training and practice are outlined.

In recent years, there has been growing concern for youths’ healthy development. Changing social forces, overburdened schools, and increased problem behaviors have contributed to these concerns, leading politicians, policy makers, and researchers to take notice (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Traditionally, a “deficit reduction” approach has been taken: a problem has been identified (e.g., obesity) and funding has been provided for intervention programs. More recently, an asset-building approach has been proposed, where focus is placed on identifying and positively developing youths’ assets (Benson, 1997). Given that youth spend almost half their waking hours in leisure (Larson & Verma, 1999), organized leisure activities (as opposed to unstructured leisure activities such as watching television) have been proposed as an effective vehicle to foster positive youth development (Larson, 2000).
Recent research in developmental psychology has focused on understanding the processes by which development occurs in youth activity settings. Dworkin, Larson, and Hansen (2003) qualitatively examined youths’ “growth experiences”—defined as “experiences that teach you something or expand you in some way, that give you new skills, new attitudes, or new ways of interacting with others” (p. 20). Focus groups with 55 adolescents who were highly involved in school and community-based voluntary structured activities (e.g., sports, fine arts, performance arts, clubs, and organizations) highlighted growth experiences in six key areas: (a) exploration and identity, (b) initiative, (c) self-regulation, (d) peer relationships, (e) teamwork and social skills, and (f) adult networks and social capital. This study led to the development of the Youth Experiences Survey (YES; Hansen & Larson, 2005) which was used in successive studies to examine personal, interpersonal, and negative experiences in different activity contexts.

Follow-up studies using the YES are of particular interest to the field of sport psychology. For example, Hansen, Larson, and Dworkin’s (2003) study of 450 American high school students examined developmental experiences of adolescents in five activity categories (i.e., sports, faith-based/service, academic/leadership, performance/fine arts, and community/vocational). While adolescents involved in sport activities reported moderately high rates of personal development experiences (i.e., self-knowledge, goal-setting, effort, time management, emotional regulation, and physical skills) and interpersonal development experiences (i.e., teamwork, social skills, leadership, and diverse peer relations), they also reported the highest rates of negative experiences (i.e., stress, negative peer interactions, social exclusion, negative group dynamics, and inappropriate adult behavior). Further, Hansen and Larson’s (2007) study, found that adolescents involved in sport spent the most time in their activity, had a leadership role more often, and had smaller group sizes—all factors found to amplify their positive developmental experiences.

Collectively, these findings highlight the importance of focusing specifically on sport programs as a context to facilitate adolescents’ positive and negative developmental experiences. Sport has consistently been found to be among the most popular and time consuming organized activities in which youth participate (e.g., Eccles & Barber, 1999; Larson & Verma, 1999). Further, sport is the leisure activity most commonly assumed to foster positive youth development; leadership, sportsmanship, teamwork, and character development are considered synonymous with youth sport participation. Of particular interest is that while an extensive body of literature associates sport with positive experiences and outcomes, a large body also associates sport with negative experiences and outcomes. Specifically, sport has been linked increased self-esteem, confidence, citizenship, academic achievement, and decreased delinquency (e.g., Broh, 2002; Mahoney, 2000) as well as increased aggression, alcohol consumption, stress, dropout, burn-out, and low morality reasoning and self-esteem (e.g., Eccles & Barber, 1999; Gould, Udry, Tuffey, & Loehr, 1996; Shields & Bredemeier, 2001). Further, negative experiences in sport such as lack of playing time, negative coach experiences, and pressure to win have consistently been associated with dropout in youth sport settings (see Weiss & Williams, 2004, for a review). Finally, it has been suggested...
that philosophies, goals, and atmospheres of community, school, and privately run sport programs vary significantly, creating a need to gain further understanding of the category coined by developmental psychology researchers as ‘sport activities’ (Feldman & Matjasko, 2005). Thus, the complexity of youth sports’ opposing positive and negative experiences and outcomes, coupled with the popularity and diversity of youth sport programs, make it a particularly rich context to study adolescent development.

Sport psychology researchers have recently suggested that sport has the potential to play an important role in the facilitation of positive youth development. For example, Fraser-Thomas, Côté, and Deakin (2005) emphasized the important roles of policy makers, sport programmers, parents, and coaches in assuring youths’ positive developmental experiences and outcomes by considering youths’ developmental stages, conducting programs in appropriate settings, and aiming to develop youths’ attributes. Further, Petitpas, Cornelius, Van Raalte, and Jones (2005) offered a framework for planning programs that foster psychosocial development, emphasizing the roles of context, internal and external assets, and research and evaluation.

Although sport psychology research conducted within the framework of positive youth development has been limited, researchers have explored related concepts. For example, Gould, Collins, Lauer, and Chung (2007) recently examined the life-skill promoting strategies used by award-nominated high school football coaches. Coaches (N = 10) highlighted the importance of holding players to high expectations, developing individualized programs, reinforcing expected behaviors, discussing and reprimanding inappropriate behaviors, and setting up procedures for dealing with parents and officials. Further, a growing number of youth sport programs are being designed to teach positive life-skills and values through sport. These include Sports United to Promote Education and Recreation (Danish, 2002), Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility (Hellison, 2005), and The First Tee (The First Tee, 1997). Only a few studies have examined the effectiveness of these programs (e.g., Papacharisis, Goudas, Danish, & Theodorakis, 2005; The First Tee, 2007) finding them generally effective but highlighting a need for more systematic and empirical evaluative research to assess their value in facilitating youths’ positive development.

**Purpose**

Given concerns about youths’ healthy development, investigation of organized activities as contexts to foster positive development is of critical importance. Research in both developmental and sport psychology highlights a need to further understand and identify the processes that may contribute to youths’ positive or negative development through sport (e.g., Dworkin et al., 2003; Petitpas et al., 2005). The purpose of this study was to gain understanding of adolescents’ positive and negative developmental experiences in sport. This study expanded on past work by focusing on adolescents’ experiences in specific sport contexts rather than examining experiences across a broad variety of activity contexts.
Competitive swimmers were chosen as the participant group for a variety of reasons. First, swimming is one of the most popular youth sports in Canada, with approximately 150,000 youth involved (Swimming Natation Canada, 2006). Second, by focusing on an individual sport we were able to limit some of the confounding factors associated with team sports. Third, swimming was an appropriate choice given past researchers’ difficulties pinpointing specific activity contexts which foster youths’ development (Hansen et al., 2003). Swimming is the primary sport of most involved youth as it is year-round (i.e., 10–12 months/year) and requires considerable training time (i.e., minimum 10 hr/week). Finally, the study of competitive swimmers was of particular interest given Swimming Canada’s new development-focused vision: “Swimming to win. Winning for life” (Swimming Natation Canada, 2006).

Participants

Participants were recruited through telephone and e-mail contacts with coaches and administrators of swim clubs in Ontario and Nova Scotia, Canada. Participants were purposefully sampled with maximum variation to gain understanding of a wide range of adolescent swimmers’ positive and negative developmental experiences during adolescence (Patton, 2002). As such, the sample included 22 participants from 9 clubs with a total of 51 different coaches during their adolescent swimming involvement. Athletes were of mixed competency levels: 7 competed at a regional level, 8 at a provincial level, and 7 at a national level. We were not successful in recruiting an equal number of male and female participants \((n = 5\) males versus \(n = 17\) females); however, this imbalance is representative of age-group swimming in Canada (Swim Ontario, 2005). Both engaged and dropout swimmers \((n = 10\) and \(n = 12\) respectively) were included to increase our likelihood of gaining a understanding of both positive and negative developmental experiences, given past literature suggesting associations between negative sport experiences and withdrawal (see Weiss & Williams, 2004, for a review). A two-year window since dropout was set as criteria to maintain consistency in the time period at which all participants were involved in swimming.

While we purposefully sampled to capture a diversity of adolescent swimmers’ experiences, we also used screening criteria to assure participants fell within the boundaries of our intended sample (i.e., adolescents who spent the majority of their structured leisure time in swimming). As such, all participants were involved in competitive swimming between the ages of 14 and 18 (mean age of participants was 16.6 years, \(SD = 1.5\)), spent a minimum of 10 hr training each week during this time \((M = 13.1\) hr, \(SD = 4.3\)), had been enrolled in competitive swimming for a minimum of four years \((M = 7.1\) years, \(SD = 2.7\)), and were involved in a maximum of three extracurricular activities per year \((M = 2.5\) activities, \(SD = 1.1\)).

Procedure

Following a procedure similar to Wright and Côté’s (2003), the interview facilitated swimmers’ ability to discuss their sport experiences during adolescence in
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an appropriate context (Schuman, 1982). At the beginning of the interview participants were reminded of the purpose of the study (i.e., to gain understanding of their positive and negative developmental experiences in competitive swimming during adolescence). Using Dworkin et al.’s (2003) definition of growth experiences as a framework, participants were informed that developmental experiences were experiences that positively or negatively contributed to their development in areas such as learning and growth, new skills and attitudes, and interactions with significant others.

Participants were asked two main questions and numerous probing and follow-up questions. Main questions focused directly on participants’ positive and negative developmental experiences (i.e., “Could you elaborate on your involvement in competitive swimming during adolescence by discussing experiences that you feel influenced your development in positive/negative ways?”). Probing and follow-up questions were used to encourage athletes to expand upon their statements (Seidman, 1991). Specific questions were developed based on past developmental and sport psychology literature and focused on program structure and design, learning opportunities, and coach, parent, and peer influences (e.g., Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005; Petitpas et al., 2005; Hansen & Larson, 2005). Sample questions included: “Could you provide an example of a typical interaction between you and your coach in that situation?” “Could you provide some examples of how the structure of competitive swimming facilitated these experiences?” In sum, the interview allowed athletes to focus on their previously identified experiences and provide understanding of those experiences (Seidman, 1991).

Ethical approval for the research project was granted by the affiliated university. All interviews were conducted at participants’ homes by the primary researcher who was trained and experienced in qualitative research. Athletes and parents completed consent forms, and interviews were approximately one hour in duration. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim, resulting in 560 pages of transcripts (12-point font, single-spaced).

Data Analysis

Content analysis followed previously established guidelines (Patton, 2002; Tesch, 1990). Specifically, transcripts were read over several times, looking for meaningful units of information (i.e., segments of text that were comprehensible by themselves, that contained one specific idea, episode, or piece of information; Tesch, 1990). Each meaning unit was labeled with a tag that represented the information within the meaning unit. Tags were then compared and those with similar meanings were grouped together, leading to the development of themes. Themes were examined and compared with common patterns across themes leading to the grouping of themes into categories. An interpretational rather than a structural approach to analysis was used given the exploratory nature of the research (Tesch, 1990). Higher order groupings reflected broad categories of athletes’ developmental experiences. Lower-order themes typically reflected specific experiences related to athletes’ programs, clubs, coaches, parents, and peers that contributed to their broader developmental experiences. Given our focus on gaining a comprehensive understanding of developmental experiences across a diverse sample of adolescent swimmers (i.e., purposeful sample), we were interested in identifying
important themes that cut across variation (Patton, 2002). For this reason, all meaning units were considered of value and reported in the results.

The trustworthiness of the data was assured through three key methods. First, participants were asked to review their transcripts for verification, and given the opportunity to add, delete, or rework data they felt did not accurately reflect their intended communications (Patton, 2002). Second, both members of the research team were involved in data analysis. Researchers’ independent analyses were followed by collaborative discussions to resolve conflicts, which in turn led to minor refinements to codings and groupings. Finally, classification consistency was verified in a random sample of 15% of the meaning units. An independent researcher familiar with qualitative research analysis categorized units into the themes and categories provided demonstrating high agreement (64 of 71 meaning units; 90%).

**Results**

Tables 1 and 2 present higher-order categories, lower-order themes, and outline the number of participants who discussed each theme. Positive experiences were grouped into 5 higher-order categories related to challenge (7 themes), meaningful adult relationships (4 themes), meaningful peer relationships (3 themes), a sense of community (2 themes), and other life experiences (6 themes). Negative developmental experiences were grouped into 4 higher-order categories related to poor coach relationships (5 themes), negative peer influences (2 themes), parent pressures (2 themes), and challenging psychological environments (2 themes).

### Positive 1: Athletes Were Challenged

1. **Sport Structure Demanded a Strong Work Ethic.** Eighteen participants discussed how the structure of competitive swimming contributed to their strong work ethic. They spoke of early morning practices, the volume and length of practices, the intensity of training camps, the consistent amount of training required to see improvement, the structure of swim meets, and the use of qualification standards to measure success. As one swimmer highlighted, “I recognize the reality—it takes the entire year to build up to make a provincial standard. So now I’m like, ‘Okay, I’m going to train now and do this now and it will be there down the road for me’” (P6).

2. **Coaches Demonstrated Belief in Athletes’ Capabilities.** Thirteen athletes spoke of their coaches’ unflinching belief in them as athletes—whether to make a certain time standard, to set and achieve a goal, or to deliver results under pressure. Athletes suggested this belief coupled with coaches’ positive focus and enthusiasm increased their confidence and motivation: “When you’d bring a goal to his attention, he’d really work on it with you. You could say, ‘I want to go to the Olympics’ and he’d believe you. He’d be like, ‘Alright, we can do this’” (P2).

3. **Sport Required Commitment, Discipline, and Perseverance.** Thirteen swimmers suggested that sport provided a unique environment (i.e., different from school and other contexts) that rewarded commitment, discipline, and perseverance. Athletes consistently highlighted the importance of being on time for prac-
Table 1  Positive Developmental Experiences: Categories and Themes

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Theme</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Athletes were challenged.</td>
<td>1. Sport structure demanded a strong work ethic</td>
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<td>2. Coaches demonstrated belief in athletes’</td>
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<td></td>
<td>capabilities</td>
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<td>3. Sport required commitment, discipline, and</td>
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<td></td>
<td>perseverance</td>
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<td>4. Coaches provided meaningful constructive</td>
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<td></td>
<td>feedback</td>
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<td></td>
<td>5. Coaches taught and guided the goal setting</td>
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<td></td>
<td>process</td>
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<td>6. Coaches pushed athletes and held high</td>
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<td></td>
<td>expectations</td>
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<td></td>
<td>7. Parents, siblings, and peers influenced</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>athletes’ work ethic</td>
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<td>2. Athletes had meaningful adult</td>
<td>1. Coaches made special connections with</td>
<td>15</td>
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<td>relationships.</td>
<td>athletes</td>
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<td>2. Sport provided an opportunity to develop</td>
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<td></td>
<td>special relationships with parents</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3. Coaches were good communicators</td>
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<td>4. Coaches served as adult role models</td>
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<tr>
<td>Category</td>
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<td>3. Athletes had meaningful peer relationships.</td>
<td>1. Sport provided an opportunity to develop close and unique friendships built on common interests</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2. Club structure provided opportunities to develop special relationships with different aged peers</td>
<td>15</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3. Sport provided opportunities for leadership and role modeling</td>
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<td>4. Athletes experienced a sense of community.</td>
<td>1. Clubs were family focused</td>
<td>10</td>
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<td>2. Clubs hosted events</td>
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<td>5. Athletes had other positive life experiences.</td>
<td>1. Sport structure, coaches, and peers facilitated good time management skills</td>
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<td>2. Sport traveling fostered independence</td>
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<td>3. Sport experiences facilitated personal attributes</td>
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<td>4. Sport experiences guided life values, interests, and careers</td>
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<td>5. Sport provided opportunities to overcome stress and develop resistance</td>
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<td>6. Sport served as a context to develop good communication skills</td>
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*Note. N represents number of participants that discussed a theme.*
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Theme</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Athletes had poor relationships with coaches.</td>
<td>1. Coaches were poor communicators</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2. Coaches had favorites</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3. Coaches were intimidating</td>
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<td>4. Coaches modeled a poor work ethic</td>
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<td>5. Coaches demonstrated inappropriate behaviors</td>
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<td>2. Athletes were negatively influenced by peers.</td>
<td>1. Peers were jealous and negative toward each other</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2. Peers demonstrated a poor work ethic</td>
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<td>3. Athletes were burdened with parent pressure.</td>
<td>1. Parents pressured athletes to excel</td>
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<td>2. Parents pressured athletes to stay in the sport</td>
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<td>4. Athletes experienced a challenging psychological environment.</td>
<td>1. Sport provided a context for excessive stress</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2. Sport provided a context for negative self-perceptions</td>
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*Note.* *N* represents number of participants that discussed a theme.
tice, making all the practices, and putting in a consistent effort at every practice in contributing to results: “This year I plateaued completely and if anything, I went downhill. I struggled. I literally struggled the entire year. But I worked harder and pushed past all my aches and pains and it finally paid off” (P6).

4. Coaches Provided Meaningful Constructive Feedback. Twelve athletes also spoke of the meaningful (i.e., constructive, specific, consistent) feedback they received from coaches and how it pushed them to higher standards: “They gave you the small things in practice. That meant they were looking. It wasn’t just ‘blah, blah’ and at the end, ‘okay, do another 100’. They were trying to improve your stroke every single set, and it showed” (P8).

5. Coaches Taught and Guided the Goal Setting Process. Eight athletes spoke of their coaches being actively involved in their goal setting processes. Coaches taught the group goal-setting strategies, worked individually with athletes to set long-term, seasonal, and short-term goals, and monitored athletes’ progress in achieving their goals.

6. Coaches Pushed Athletes and Held High Expectations. Seven athletes spoke of their coaches pushing them and holding them to very high standards. Swimmers used adjectives such as “demanding,” “slave driver,” and “intense” to describe their coaches, and provided examples of coaches calling them at 5:30 in the morning if they were not at practice.

7. Parents, Siblings, and Peers Influenced Athletes’ Work Ethic. Seven athletes spoke of the influence significant others had on their work ethic. For example, family members often served as role models and peers were sometimes the source of a reciprocal energy: “I can work hard on my own, but I work harder if I’m in a lane with people who are faster” (P5).

Positive 2: Athletes Had Meaningful Adult Relationships

1. Coaches Made Special Connections With Athletes. Fifteen athletes highlighted the special relationships they had with their coaches. Athletes emphasized coaches’ attentiveness to swimmers’ feelings, emotions, and moods, interest in individuals beyond their pool performances, and ability to joke around with swimmers. One athlete commented, “If I was feeling sad, she would know and she would come over and be like, ‘What’s wrong?’ and we’d have a talk together. She’d be like, ‘It’s okay. We all have those days’” (P16).

2. Sport Provided an Opportunity to Develop Special Relationships With Parents. Thirteen athletes spoke of the special relationships they developed with their parents as a result of swimming. Some suggested it was the constant highs and lows of the sport that bonded them, whereas others highlighted early morning drives to practices and road trips to meets as special times: “My mom wakes me up. I schlep out of bed and into the car and we just talk until we get there. We have a very good relationship. We laugh a lot and talk about everything” (P10).

3. Coaches Were Good Communicators. Ten athletes suggested their coaches had strong communication skills (i.e., democratic styles and supportive behav-
iors). One swimmer highlighted her coach’s ability to accurately read her and react appropriately: “He knew I was having a rough time. We were both yelling at each other and he was like, ‘Go get something to drink and cool off and come back and talk to me when you’re settled’” (P18).

4. Coaches Served as Adult Role Models. Coaches also served as role models for swimmers. Six swimmers commented specifically on their coaches’ athletic accomplishments, their knowledge and expertise, and their personalities. A great deal of respect was evident in adolescents’ portrayal of their coaches: “When she talks, I’m all ears. I try and do what she says because she really knows what she’s talking about. She’s been to worlds and everything” (P6).

Positive 3: Athletes Had Meaningful Peer Relationships

1. Sport Provided an Opportunity to Develop Close and Unique Friendships Built on Common Interests. Sixteen athletes commented on their unique swimming friendships: their common goals, their similar work ethic, their genuine support and care for each other, and the contagious enthusiasm they shared for the sport. One athlete compared her swimming peers to her school peers: “They’ve been in your group forever. You’ve gone on trips with them. You know their families. They encourage you to do well. They’re just less tricky. At swimming you practice together, you work hard together, and then you celebrate together” (P20).

2. Club Structure Provided Opportunities to Develop Special Relationships With Different Aged Peers. Fifteen athletes also spoke of the special relationships that developed between younger and older swimmers within the club. While interactions often including joking around and having fun together, relationships were built on athletes’ genuine care for each other: “I was the one that they always looked out for, because I was one of the younger ones. It was kind of nice being the little sister. I’ve never been the little sister, so it was a good experience” (P18).

3. Sport Provided Opportunities for Leadership and Role Modeling. Twelve athletes highlighted the leadership and role modeling opportunities that were available to them through swimming—whether in formal roles such as organizing club meets and coaching younger swimmers, or in less formal roles such as walking younger swimmers through their first meet, and cheering them on. Many remembered being “in awe of” and “having a lot of respect for” older swimmers. As adolescents, they strove to similarly influence younger swimmers.

Positive 4: Athletes Experienced a Sense of Community

1. Clubs Were Family Focused. Ten participants discussed their clubs’ family focus in contributing to a sense of community. Parents and siblings were encouraged to get involved in meets, fundraising, and club events. One athlete outlined, “All the parents became really close and they were all big on supporting each other’s kids. If someone’s parents weren’t at a meet, my parents might give them a ride and get them lunch” (P16).
2. Clubs Hosted Events. Seven athletes also spoke of club events that facilitated a sense of community. Many clubs kicked the year off with an intraclub meet or a retreat. Other events included muffin mornings, Christmas parties, swim-a-thons, time trials, and year-end banquets.

Positive 5: Athletes Had Other Positive Life Experiences

1. Sport Structure, Coaches, and Peers Facilitated Good Time Management Skills. Nine athletes suggested the implicit structure of swimming (i.e., hours of training, early mornings, traveling) necessitated that they balance their swimming demands with other life demands such as school, a social life, and sometimes even a job. They highlighted how coaches facilitated their time management by having designated ‘homework time’ on trips and swimming peers positively influenced them by helping them out with their homework before practices.

2. Sport Traveling Fostered Independence. Nine athletes discussed how traveling to swim meets and training camps from a very young age provided an opportunity to develop independence. Though they clearly enjoyed the freedom that was granted to them on these trips, they also learned to be disciplined and act responsibly: Adolescents would usually stay in hotel rooms with their peers, be required to purchase and prepare their own food, find their own form of transportation to the pool, and set their own curfews and nap times.

3. Sport Experiences Facilitated Personal Attributes. Nine athletes suggested swimming facilitated their development of a variety of other personal attributes such as confidence, identity, respect, self-awareness, and assertiveness. One athlete suggested, “I think it made me more outgoing. Just because you get comfortable in a group of people, and you meet people from all over the country” (P20). Another outlined, “I’d say I’ve definitely become more assertive. Anyone who can make it through warm-up at one of the big swim meets, and live to talk about it.” (P10).

4. Sport Experiences Guided Life Values, Interests, and Careers. Nine swimmers suggested that their swimming experiences were helping to guide their current and future life choices in the areas of schooling, jobs and careers in health, health promotion, and teaching (e.g., kinesiology, chiropractic, medicine, physiotherapy, education, coaching, lifeguarding, teaching swimming lessons).

5. Sport Provided Opportunities to Overcome Stress and Develop Resilience. Five athletes outlined how they learned to overcome stress and develop resilience in sport (e.g., learned to relax, control nerves, refocus) and suggested these processes were usually facilitated through coaches, peers, and parents: “[Coach] used to tell me that I had to calm down. She said my skills were there, but I was freaking out. So I worked on it and I’m better now” (E4).

6. Sport Served as a Context to Develop Good Communication Skills. Four athletes discussed how sport served as an important context for modeling, teaching, and developing communication, problem-solving, and conflict resolution skills. Athletes suggested that the intimacy of the club, and the closeness of relationships required that difficult situations always be addressed: “[Coach] was very
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set we had to resolve this. He pulled us both out of the water and heard both our sides of the story and all together we tackled the issue” (P6).

Negative 1: Athletes Had Poor Relationships With Coaches

1. Coaches Were Poor Communicators. Nine athletes commented on their coaches’ poor communication skills (e.g., autocratic styles, condescending tones): “He might be like, ‘You have to fix this’ because you really messed something up. But if you just had a bad race, he doesn’t even talk to you. That’s how you know you didn’t do well” (P4).

2. Coaches Had Favorites. Nine participants discussed their coaches having “favorites” or providing unequally attention to swimmers. They suggested this negatively affected their motivation, perseverance, and self-concept: “After a really good race you’d be really excited for a pat on the back and a ‘Good job!’ and it just wouldn’t be there” (P17).

3. Coaches Were Intimidating. Seven swimmers discussed coaches’ intimidating demeanor (e.g., yelling, focusing only on results, lacking empathy): “If I told him my back was hurting, he wouldn’t say, ‘Okay, let’s see what we can do.’ He’d say, ‘What do you want me to do about it?’ I wouldn’t even think about telling him. I’d be too scared” (E4).

4. Coaches Modeled a Poor Work Ethic. Six athletes also discussed their coaches’ poor work ethic (e.g., failing to take coaching duties seriously, putting minimal effort into practice and program design, being physically lazy, missing practices). “Sometimes [Coach] wouldn’t even show up. And what’s that telling us? If the coach doesn’t show up, why are we here?” (P13).

5. Coaches Demonstrated Inappropriate Behaviors. Six participants suggested coaches demonstrated inappropriate behaviors. Some coaches commented on swimmers’ weight: “He was so used to coaching older swimmers, he didn’t think before he talked to me. You can’t say, ‘You’re 10 pounds overweight’ to a 14 year old girl. I don’t think he understood that” (P2). Other coaches crossed the healthy boundaries of a coach-athlete relationship (e.g., coaches knew every detail of swimmers’ lives, coaches reprimanded athletes for life versus swimming issues).

Negative 2: Athletes Were Negatively Influenced by Peers

1. Peers Were Jealous and Negative Toward Each Other. Four athletes spoke of jealousies and rivalries negatively influencing them: “They picked apart things that I didn’t do right. It really upset me that people from my own club were trying to bring me down” (P6).

2. Peers Demonstrated a Poor Work Ethic. Three athletes suggested peers’ poor work ethic (e.g., skipping practice, fooling around) sometimes negatively influenced them: “Some of my close friends fooled around sometimes. So I guess I did too. We just did it together” (P9).
Negative 3: Athletes Were Burdened With Parent Pressure

1. Parents Pressured Athletes to Excel. Four athletes spoke of parents’ pressure to excel in the sport (e.g., pressure to win, make a standard, beat a certain person): “They’d kind of bribe, ‘If you do five out of five best times in this meet, you’ll get X’” (P20).

2. Parents Pressured Athletes to Stay in the Sport. Three participants experienced pressure to stay involved in competitive swimming. One swimmer went through a particularly difficult period with her father when she decided to take some time off:

   My dad was really disappointed. He thought that when I said “break,” it meant quitting for good. We didn’t talk for three months. It was really rough for my family because the whole, “We moved down here for you. The family suffered, and then you quit” (P2).

Negative 4: Athletes Experienced a Challenging Psychological Environment

1. Sport Provided a Context for Excessive Stress. Six athletes discussed the mental and emotional struggles they experienced in the competitive sport environment. In particular, athletes spoke of their inability to cope in stressful situations, often leading them to “crash” physically (i.e., burnout, dropout, injury, illness) or “meltdown” psychologically. As one athlete recounts:

   I’m not very good at dealing with failure. When I was younger, I was one of the ones on top. When I got older, everyone started to catch up and it got harder to beat them. I just became a mental wreck. I remember my last meet really well. I did a 100 free and I got disqualified cause I did a bad start and I remember freaking out on my coach and freaking out on my best friend and they got mad at me and I was upset with myself because I had just done so bad and I just didn’t know what to do with myself. (P18)

2. Sport Provided a Context for Negative Self-Perceptions. Three athletes also spoke of feelings of low self-esteem, inferiority, and diminished competence as a result of their sport environment: “I was always near the end of the lane and they were always at the beginning. Some days it made you feel really crappy because you realized this is your position” (P17).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to gain understanding of adolescents’ positive and negative developmental experiences in sport. Many of the study’s findings are consistent with past research focused on adolescent development in diverse activity contexts (e.g., Dworkin et al., 2003; Hansen et al., 2003); however, findings also suggest sport may provide a distinct setting in the facilitation of adolescents’ developmental experiences. As such, the discussion that follows focuses on findings that highlight sport’s significant role in facilitating adolescents’ development.
Important areas for future research and implications for practice are also outlined.

**Challenge**

Athletes in this study highlighted how their sport challenged them, and pinpointed specific characteristics of their competitive swimming environment that facilitated this positive developmental experience. For example, swimmers discussed the time and effort required to achieve results (e.g., early morning practices, volume and length of practices, intensity of training camps) and their sport’s focus on self-improvement (e.g., personal best times, graded time standards). Whereas past researchers (e.g., Dworkin et al., 2003; Hansen et al., 2003) found that adolescents had developmental experiences related to effort and perseverance in all activity types (i.e., sports, faith-based/service, academic/leadership, performance/fine arts, community/vocational), these experiences were most prevalent in sports.

Additional investigation is warranted to clarify how unique developmental experiences related to challenge, effort, commitment, discipline, and perseverance are to sport relative to other activity contexts and whether these specific developmental experiences have different meanings to adolescents in sport contexts relative to other activity contexts. Further, given past work highlighting the importance of program design in facilitating positive developmental experiences and outcomes (e.g., Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005; Hansen & Larson, 2007; Petitpas et al., 2005), there may also be benefit in examining these specific developmental experiences across different sport contexts (e.g., different types of sports, competition levels, investment levels) to understand how their facilitation may differ in each context.

**Coaches**

A unique theme discussed by more than half of athletes related to coaches’ belief in them (e.g., to make a time standard, set and achieve a goal, deliver results under pressure). This belief was often demonstrated in things coaches said, but was also evident in coaches’ enthusiasm, positive focus, and encouragement. Athletes spoke of how this belief positively influenced them on many levels—from self-efficacy to continued motivation for the sport. Although much research has highlighted the important role of athlete self-efficacy in sport performance and persistence (e.g., Kane, Marks, Zaccaro, & Blair, 1996), the role of coaches’ belief has been largely overlooked. Additional understanding of coach belief as a means of motivating athletes would be beneficial given consistent associations between negative coach experiences, motivation, and sport dropout (see Weiss & Williams, 2004, for a review).

Findings highlighting the importance of coaches’ belief in athletes, coupled with other findings related to coach-athlete interactions (e.g., communication, connections, role models) suggest a void in current youth sport literature. Whereas an extensive body of research in sport psychology has focused on coaching behaviors and styles (see Chelladurai, 2007, for a review) and a large body of
developmental psychology research has focused on the benefits of adolescents’ relationships with adult leaders (e.g., support, links to community, social capital), significantly less work has focused on the specific nature of coach-athlete relationships in youth sport settings (e.g., Jowett, Timson-Katchis, & Adams, 2007). Further exploration of coach-athlete relationships in youth contexts using innovative methodologies (e.g., longitudinal observation of coach-athlete interactions coupled with qualitative interviews focused on the dynamic, intertwined, and reciprocal nature of relationships) would advance current knowledge.

Findings of contrasting positive and negative developmental experiences related to coaches are also of interest. Although most athletes discussed the special relationships they had with coaches, many also discussed coaches’ intimidating demeanor, their preference for favorites, and their demonstration of inappropriate behaviors. Though half of athletes highlighted coaches’ good communication skills, half also highlighted their poor communication skills. While some athletes suggested that coaches were positive role models, others suggested they were poor models. Interestingly, athletes did not usually hold hard feelings toward coaches with whom they had negative experiences, and even suggested that coaches did not realize how their behaviors influenced athletes. These findings are consistent with past literature (e.g., Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005; Hansen & Larson, 2007; Hansen et al., 2003) highlighting that coaches can both positively and negatively influence youths’ sport experiences. It is of particular interest to note that despite a very diverse sample, all 22 participants discussed both positive and negative developmental experiences related to their coaches. Future research could explore whether certain positive coach-related experiences may ‘balance out’ or neutralize negative experiences.

Parents

Swimmers highlighted specific means by which they felt their involvement facilitated special relationships with parents (e.g., the extensive time they spent traveling to practices and meets together, the opportunities to share the endless highs and lows of the sport). Whereas research in developmental psychology (e.g., Hansen & Larson, 2007; Hansen et al., 2003) has examined the role of family in different activity contexts, adolescents involved in sports typically rate parent relationships lower than adolescents involved in other activities. Further, although a large body of youth sport research has focused on parents, this research has centered primarily on parents’ roles in facilitating their children’s sport involvement from a practical standpoint (e.g., providing resources) and on parents’ psychosocial influences (e.g., supporting, pressuring, role modeling). Collectively, past and present findings suggest a need to use more innovative methodologies (e.g., ethnography, journal use) to gain deeper understanding of the ongoing interactions between adolescent athletes and their parents over time, and to tap into the specific processes and mechanisms by which relationships develop.

Although there is abundant literature suggesting parents can negatively influence their children’s sport experiences (e.g., Gould et al., 1996), only a few athletes in this study discussed parent pressure as problematic. One reason for this may be that sport programmers are beginning to address parent issues through
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more proactive education programs. For example, coaches’ in Gould et al.’s (2007) study outlined their use of parent meetings and discussions to inform, communicate with, and involve parents. Though similar strategies were not discussed in the current study, further research is warranted to determine how different programs are addressing parent education in youth sport contexts, and their effectiveness in doing so.

Clubs

Past literature in sport and developmental psychology has highlighted that sport can facilitate adolescents’ sense of belonging and linkages to their community (e.g., Carron & Hausenblas, 1990; Dworkin et al., 2003; Hansen et al., 2003). However, participants in this study spoke of creating a community, and they highlighted the important role clubs played in facilitating this process. Typically, swimmers’ communities included their families, their peers, and their coaches, as well as the families of their peers and coaches (i.e., parents, siblings, grandparents, spouses, and children). Findings support past work (Gergen, 1991) suggesting that traditional sites for community (e.g., churches, neighborhoods) are being replaced with more modern contexts such as those built around leisure. At a time of changing societal trends leading to growing isolation (Bauman, 2001), further investigation of sport clubs’ roles in facilitating a sense of community among youth would be beneficial.

Peers

Consistent with past literature (e.g., Dworkin et al., 2003; Weiss, Smith, & Theeboom, 1996; Wright & Côté, 2003), adolescents in this study highlighted primarily positive peer-related developmental experiences. A few athletes also spoke of negative experiences related to jealousy, competitiveness, and poor role modeling; however, interpersonal issues were usually short lasted, as coaches, parents or peers worked with involved swimmers to resolve issues. It has been suggested that sport may provide an inflated ground for common adolescent peer-related conflicts (e.g., Weiss, et al., 1996); however, sport also typically requires swift resolution to conflicts in order for athletes to be effective. As such, further exploratory research focused on understanding how peer-related conflicts are resolved in youth sport settings would be beneficial to both sport and developmental psychology fields.

Stress

Finally, findings of this study draw attention to the uniqueness of the competitive sport environment in contributing to adolescents’ stress. Participants highlighted two extremely different means of experiencing their sport-related stress. Five participants outlined how they developed coping skills to learn to overcome their stress, and six participants discussed their inability to deal with the mental challenges of sport. What is particularly interesting is that while almost one third of the sample spoke of experiencing mental and emotional challenges, they spoke of feeling very isolated and alone in going through their experiences.
Past research in developmental and sport psychology has suggested sports has the potential to facilitate both beneficial experiences related to self-regulation and negative experiences related to excessive stress. For example, in Hansen et al. (2003) and Larson et al.’s (2006) studies, adolescents involved in sport activities scored higher than adolescents in other activity categories on both positive emotional regulation and negative stress subscales. Further, recent reviews (e.g., Petlichkoff, 2004) highlight how sport involvement is associated with both emotional regulation skills (e.g., coping, focusing, controlling distractions) and negative emotional states (e.g., anxiety). Dworkin and Larson (2007) propose that negative experiences such as stress can lead to positive development when adolescents learn how to overcome the problem (e.g., develop appropriate emotional regulation skills). Future research should focus on understanding contextual influences (e.g., sport programmers, coaches, parents, peers) and individual factors (e.g., perfectionism, motivation) that may be contributing to adolescents’ positive or negative adaptations to sport-related stress.

Implications and Limitations

Fraser-Thomas et al. (2005) highlight the importance of policy makers, sport programmers, coaches, and parents playing an active role in assuring youths’ positive experiences in sport programs. Based on this study’s findings, the following are a few suggestions for the delivery of adolescent competitive swimming programs that facilitate positive developmental experiences.

First, findings reinforce calls by previous researchers (e.g., Gould et al., 2007; Petitpas et al., 2005) to put additional emphasis on coach training. Many athletes outlined concerns regarding coaches’ ability to understand adolescents’ psychological, social, and emotional development, highlighting a need for improved curricular content and practical learning in this area. Consistent with past research (Smoll & Smith, 2002) findings also emphasize a disconnect between coaches’ perceptions of their behaviors and others’ perceptions of coaches’ behaviors. Although systematic evaluation of all youth sport coaches in a program or organization is often not feasible, coach certification programs and pedagogical workshops could place additional weight on the importance and value of self-evaluation and peer-evaluation, and outline effective methods for conducting such evaluations. A lack of time is often suggested as the primary reason why coaches do not engage in additional training; however, past research (Smoll & Smith, 2002) has shown the effectiveness of even a two-hour coaching workshop.

Second, findings suggest coaches should be cautious not to underestimate their role in influencing athletes’ development. Athletes in this study clearly outlined specific methods by which coaches influenced their positive and negative developmental experiences (e.g., by believing in their capabilities, modeling a solid/poor work ethic, demonstrating good/poor communication skills, providing opportunities for independence, showing favorites). As such, coaches should increase awareness and self-monitoring of both their overt and covert behaviors.

Third, this study highlights coaches’ important roles in facilitating adolescents’ positive adaptation to the stressful environment afforded by competitive sport. While many athletes found the sport’s stressful environment a challenge
that they were able to overcome, other athletes struggled through stressful sport experiences feeling very much alone. Coaches should begin by being in tune with each individual athlete’s susceptibility and response to stressful situations. Further, coaches should very carefully weigh their provision of a challenging environment with opportunities for success in that environment (Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, & Whalen, 1993). In addition, coaches could pair-off younger athletes with older athletes who have gone through similar experiences, allowing a mentoring and guiding process to occur and lessen adolescents’ feelings of frustration and isolation.

Implications must be considered in light of study limitations. This study focused on adolescents’ development through competitive swimming in Canada. As such, generalizations to other sport contexts should be done with caution due to substantial differences between programs (Feldman & Matjasko, 2005). Further, this study examined adolescents’ development in isolation of other potential influencers (e.g., other youth programs, sociocultural factors). Research exploring interactions between key influencers in adolescents’ development would significantly advance current work in the field. Evidently, the study’s retrospective protocol could lead to biases, distortions, and omissions in the data (Rubin & Wenzel, 1996); however, the sample was purposefully selected to limit participants’ time since involvement, and researchers used situation-specific cues and probes to maximize data accuracy. Finally, more females than males participated in this study. Future investigation should aim to gain a more comprehensive understanding of both genders’ developmental experiences in sport, and potential differences in male and females’ experiences.

In sum, findings of this study advance previous sport and developmental psychology research by highlighting sport as an important context in facilitating adolescents’ development. Although much research remains to be done, this study sheds preliminary light on the important roles that youth sport programmers, clubs, coaches, and parents can play in assuring youth have positive experiences in their sport programs.

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