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Just for the fun of it: coaches' perceptions of an exemplary community youth sport program

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ABSTRACT

Background: A growing body of research has studied sport as a vehicle for positive youth development (PYD). While much of this research has investigated the developmental outcomes associated with sport participation, less is known about the mechanisms through which PYD occurs in a sport context. Further, much of the research on PYD in sport has studied competitive sport settings, while comparatively less is known about recreational sport.

Aims: This qualitative descriptive study explored coaches' perceptions of a successful recreational community youth basketball league. Specifically, this study aimed to describe coaches' perceptions of the structure of the league, the developmental outcomes associated with youth's participation in this sport program, as well as the mechanisms through which these outcomes are realized.

Participants: A total of 12 volunteer basketball coaches (6 males and 6 females) were purposefully selected to participate in this study. The coaches were between 16 and 59 years old, had an average of 10.1 years of coaching experience, and 6 of the coaches previously played in the league in their youth.

Data collection: Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with each basketball coach.

Data analysis: The interviews were transcribed verbatim and subjected to a thematic analysis that was driven by both the data and extant PYD conceptual frameworks.

Findings: Identified themes were integrated into an existing PYD conceptual framework. These themes related to immediate (e.g. enjoyment), short-term (e.g. competence, confidence, connection, and character), and long-term developmental outcomes (e.g. contribution), as well as social and contextual processes (e.g. activities, social relationships, and settings) which underpin these outcomes.

Conclusion: This study extended the current body of research on PYD in sport through emphasizing the importance of ensuring that youth have enjoyable, positive immediate experiences in sport, and that accumulated positive experiences result, over time, in lasting effects on athletes' development.

Introduction

Positive youth development (PYD) is an asset-building perspective on adolescence that suggests that all youth have personal strengths that can be developed (Lerner et al. 2005). The 5 Cs framework of

PYD (Lerner et al. 2005) further suggests that PYD occurs when youth exhibit growth in five main areas: Competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring. Over time, as youth demonstrate adaptive growth in these areas, they move toward the ultimate goal of becoming thriving, contributing members of society (Lerner 2004b). Rooted in relational developmental systems theory (Lerner 2004a), PYD occurs through mutually influential interactions between individuals and the various contexts in which they are embedded. While youth development occurs across a complex set of interrelated contexts, organized sport presents unique features that can help to facilitate PYD (Fraser-Thomas, Côté, and Deakin 2005). Compared to other structured activities, organized sport may be particularly well-suited to nurturing PYD because it requires high amounts of effort and concentration and occurs regularly over time, while remaining inherently enjoyable (Larson 2000). Thus, from a relational developmental systems perspective, it is important to consider all aspects of a sport context (e.g. social relationships, type of sport activities, and competitive environment) to better understand its potential contribution to PYD (Agans et al. 2016).

PYD research began by predominantly focusing on extra-curricular activities such as after-school clubs (e.g. Lerner et al. 2005), Furthermore, developmental scientists have generally combined all types of sport participation into a single category (e.g. Zarrett et al. 2009). However, this strategy fails to reflect the myriad of differences in youth sport programming, and researchers should continue to study the organized sport context in greater detail to examine other salient factors which may influence PYD (Agans and Geldhof 2012).

Sport research has begun to embrace this call in studying PYD in various types of organized sport programs, including high school sport (e.g. Camiré, Trudel, and Forneris 2009), developmental community sport (e.g. Fraser-Thomas and Côté 2009), as well as sport camp settings (e.g. Jones et al. 2011; McDonough et al. 2013). Overall, this body of literature supports the view of organized sport as a fertile context for promoting PYD (Holt and Neely 2011). Although recent studies have examined physical activity-based PYD camps which de-emphasize competition (e.g. McDonough et al. 2013), previous literature has generally investigated developmental or performance-oriented sport settings. Consequently, there remains a need to consider comparatively understudied recreational community sport programs (Holt and Jones 2008).

One of the hallmark features of recreational sport is its emphasis on social interaction (Trudel and Gilbert 2006). Because the recreational sport context is less rigidly focused on sport-specific outcomes, there may be more opportunities for interaction with peers, which is important because peers are viewed as increasingly salient social agents and a primary source of competence information and social support in adolescence (Horn 2004). Further, positive peer relationships (e.g. friendships) have been shown to be beneficial in terms of both sport participation and personal development (MacDonald et al. 2011). Indeed, opportunities for interaction with peers can help to facilitate the development of many personal and social skills critical to PYD (Holt et al. 2008; Mac-Donald et al. 2011). In light of sport's potential contributions to development, it is imperative to consider how these enriching sport experiences can be provided to youth who would benefit from these experiences the most.

There is a need to study how sport programs can be structured to facilitate participation and PYD among youth from disadvantaged backgrounds, as they are most commonly excluded from sport participation (Collins and Kay 2014). It has been suggested that environmental, intrapersonal, and interpersonal factors should all be considered in any effort to promote sport participation among disadvantaged youth (Humbert et al. 2006). School-based sport programs represent fertile contexts for PYD among disadvantaged youth due to their low cost and safe environment (Holt et al. 2012). Interestingly, Holt et al. (2012) found fewer developmental benefits in intramural sports compared to sport teams, citing the importance of structuring a sport environment specifically focused on PYD. PYD-based sport and physical activity programs have indeed been shown to be effective in promoting a wide range of PYD outcomes among disadvantaged youth (e.g. Gould, Flett, and Lauer 2012; McDonough et al. 2013). Although these explicitly PYD-focused programs appear to be valuable, there remains a need to identify every day community sport programs

whose aims implicitly align with PYD, as they may be more sustainable in the long-term (Turnnidge, Côté, and Hancock 2014).

Conceptual framework

Drawing upon relational developmental systems theory (Lerner 2004a) and integrating existing PYD research, Côté, Turnnidge, and Vierimaa (2016) recently proposed the Personal Assets Framework as a conceptual framework that describes both the mechanisms and outcomes of PYD in sport. The Personal Assets Framework suggests that youth's development in sport is shaped by three main dynamic elements: (a) the nature of the sport activities in which youth participate; (b) the types of social relationships formed within a sport context; and (c) the physical and social characteristics of the sport setting itself. When these dynamic elements are appropriately aligned, PYD should occur through youth's growth in four areas known as the 4 Cs: competence, confidence, connection, and character. The 4 Cs represent a collapsed, sport-specific adaptation of Lerner et al. (2005) 5 Cs framework, given the integration of character, caring, and compassion in the sport literature (Côté et al. 2010). Over time, this framework suggests that growth in the 4 Cs can help to facilitate three long-term sport outcomes: (a) the attainment of sport expertise; (b) life-long participation in sport and physical activity; and (c) personal development and thriving across life contexts.

   This qualitative study explored coaches' perceptions of a community youth sport program. Specifically, this study had three primary aims: (1) to describe the structure of the league; (2) to examine perceived developmental changes among athletes; and (3) to use the Personal Assets Framework for Sport to explore the mechanisms and outcomes through which development occurs within this sport setting.

Method

Participants

All participants were members of the same basketball league from a midsized city in Ontario, Canada, which was purposefully sampled because of its local popularity and national reputation as a league which typifies many PYD principles. This league has continually grown in size over its 60 years of existence and is currently home to almost 500 boys and girls aged 8–14. The league's mandate is to provide an opportunity to learn basic basketball skills, sportspersonship, and above all else, have fun. The league adopts a holistic approach to athlete development by emphasizing physical, social, and emotional development. For instance, policies stipulate that all players should receive equal playing time. In addition, the league is accessible to a wide range of youth since it is located in a lower income neighborhood, and charges only a 10-dollar registration fee. Consequently, there is considerable variability in players' ability levels, as many are completely new to the sport while others concurrently participate in other club leagues. Boys and girls play in separate divisions, with each team comprised approximately 12 players who are up to 3 years apart. All teams play one weekly 45-minute game, but standings are not kept and there are no playoffs at the end of the 6-month season. In these ways, the league can be differentiated from traditional developmental sport programs, which usually have some selection process, and greater costs, travel, and practice time (Trudel and Gilbert 2006). Although there are no practices outside of the weekly games, coaches are expected to facilitate a positive environment and teach fundamental skills and fair play. In addition, coaches are encouraged (but are not required) to arrive early to their own games and to help out in other capacities including officiating and scorekeeping during other league games. The league also has a strong history of past players who are motivated to volunteer with the league as adults (e.g. coaching), some of whom have since received accolades at the municipal, provincial, and national levels for their service to the community.

Participants were 12 volunteer coaches ($n = 6$ male; $n = 6$ female) aged 16–59 ($M = 39.5$ years) with an average of 10.1 years of coaching experience. This sample yielded meaningful, information-rich data, which were sufficient in depth to reach data saturation (Guest, Bunce, and Johnson 2006). The coaches received no formal training through the league, but attended a pre-season meeting wherein league executives explained that they were expected to uphold the league's values (as described above), which is monitored by division convenors throughout the season. The participants were purposefully sampled from various divisions (both age and gender) of the basketball league to ensure a diverse, yet representative sample. Six of the sampled coaches had previously played in the league as athletes, while five also coached their own children in the league at the time of the interviews.

Procedure

Institutional ethical approval and participant informed consent was obtained prior to beginning data collection. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in a location of the participants' choosing. Most interviews were conducted in a classroom of the school which hosted the basketball league. All of the interviews were conducted by a team of two researchers who completed comprehensive training in qualitative research prior to the study, which involved review and discussion of readings on qualitative methods as well as pilot interviews with coaches uninvolved in the study. The two interviewers attended weekly games leading up to the data collection to familiarize themselves with the league. The interviewers quietly observed the environment from the sidelines and engaged in informal conversations with other spectators. This enabled the interviewers to gain rapport with the coaches and more effectively probe during interviews. Both interviewers were present for all interviews, during which one would conduct the interview, while the other would take detailed notes.

At the beginning of each interview, participants were explained the study rationale, and were assured of confidentiality. The interviewers followed a guide which included background, behavior, opinion, and knowledge questions (Patton 2002). Interviews began with introductory background questions related to demographics, as well as coaching background and philosophy. These questions aimed to enhance rapport and helped to contextualize participants' responses. The main section of the interview focused on the coaches' perceptions of the league; specifically, how the league is run (i.e. knowledge questions), what outcomes they believe athletes glean from their participation (i.e. opinion questions), and potential processes through which these outcomes are realized (i.e. behavior questions). Sample questions include 'Please describe what a typical game is like for you', and 'If I was a new player or coach thinking about joining the league, what would you tell me about it?' The researchers used probing questions throughout the interviews to ensure rich, detailed responses (Patton 2002). In line with the Personal Assets Framework (Côté, Turnnidge, and Vierimaa 2016), the questions aimed to broadly assess the developmental outcomes associated with youth's participation in the league, as well as the potential mechanisms underpinning these processes. However, the Personal Assets Framework was not used to directly inform the line of questioning, so as to allow for the later investigation of the relevance and fit of this framework to the identified themes.

Data analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). Interviews lasted between 32 and 66 minutes ($M = 45.57$ minutes), which yielded a total of 260 pages of transcripts. The first step in the analysis involved systematically reviewing the transcripts and assigning initial codes to meaningful units of data. This initial open coding stage was inductive in that codes were assigned to reflect the essence of the units of data. The second step involved organizing these initial codes into groups which shared common themes. Afterward, all of the co-authors met to review and revise this set of initial themes. At this point, the authors used both inductive and deductive analysis while reviewing the themes and attempting to create a

thematic map based upon the Personal Assets Framework (Côté, Turnnidge, and Vierimaa 2016). Thus, the authors attempted to map the generated themes onto the Personal Assets Framework, while importantly, remaining sensitive to themes that could not be clearly situated within this framework. This inductive-deductive approach (Sparkes and Smith 2014) was employed in order to test the relevance and fit of the Personal Assets Framework to the data. The resultant thematic map was continually refined by all members of the research team until agreement was reached. The final stage involved defining and naming the themes. Throughout this process, minor refinements to the themes occurred, until clear and concise definitions were identified and agreed upon by the research team.

Methodological rigor

Methodological rigor and trustworthiness (Shenton 2004; Sparkes and Smith 2014) were addressed through the use of multiple strategies. The researchers aimed to ensure credibility using four main strategies. First, prolonged engagement was used as the researchers attended weekly league games throughout the season, allowing them to gain rapport with the participants, while also immersing themselves in the league so that they could ask more effective probing questions during the interviews. Second, the authors attempted to recruit a diverse sample of coaches reflecting a wide range of experiences. Third, member checks were used, whereby the interview transcripts were returned to the participations to review for accuracy, at which point they were also encouraged to expand or clarify on any of their responses. Finally, peer debriefing was employed as the primary researcher initially coded the data and met with the research team throughout the subsequent stages of analysis to ensure that all authors were in agreement regarding the interpretation of the data and the resultant themes. In regards to transferability, the boundaries of the case (i.e. the basketball league) have been clearly conveyed through the provision of background information and history of the league. Additionally, a thick description of the results has been provided, which altogether helps to facilitate naturalistic generalizability where the readers themselves can draw their own generalizations from this study to other contexts (Sparkes and Smith 2014). The issues of dependability and confirmability were addressed through providing an in-depth methodological description regarding data gathering and analysis.

Results

The themes identified from the data were situated within the Personal Assets Framework for Sport (Figure 1; adapted from Côté, Turnnidge, and Vierimaa 2016) and are summarized in Table 1. The following sections outline each of these areas in greater detail and provide selected quotes to further illuminate and enhance the clarity of the results. Each quote includes a code that reflects the specific coach responsible for each passage (e.g. C11 – Coach 11).

Dynamic elements

Activities

Coaches provided a great deal of detail in describing the nature of the sport activities that are played within the basketball league. Primarily, the league is described as an opportunity for youth to *simply play*. Aside from a single practice at the beginning of the season, there is a focus on letting youth learn through weekly organized games. Since there are no formal practices or coaching of specific skills, youth primarily develop sport skills through experiential learning. One coach exclaimed that he enjoyed these aspects of the league: 'I like that there's no practice, I'll be honest, I like that you just go out and you play … that the kids learn through playing' (C11). These weekly organized games also seem to be largely youth-driven; coaches and referees enforce rules and teach basic basketball skills during games, but attempt to minimize the pressure placed upon the athletes.
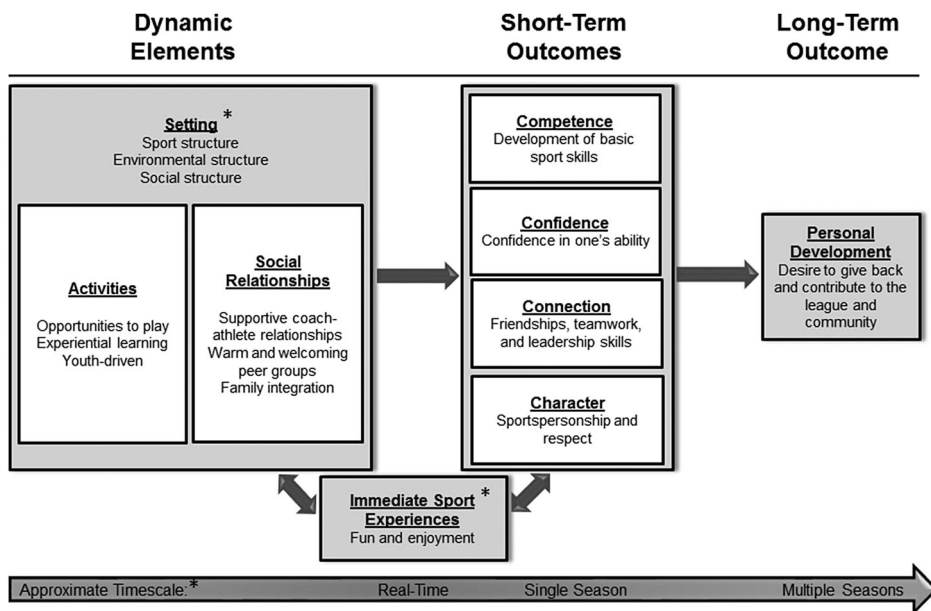
Figure 1. The personal assets framework for sport (adapted from Côté, Turnnidge, and Vierimaa 2016).

Note: Asterisks indicate new or adapted elements of the original model that emerged from the study's findings. Specifically, these modifications reflect the nested nature of activities and social relationships within the setting, the specification of an approximate timescale, and the addition of immediate sport experiences.

Social relationships

The importance of close and supportive relationships between coaches and athletes appears to be central to the league's success. Coaches discussed taking advantage of opportunities to get to know their players not only as athletes, but people: 'It is a chance to meet them … you meet them through the sport, but you can reach into their lives a little bit too … We try and reach the kids beyond the game of basketball' (C06). In addition to coaches, peers also appear to be prominent social agents in the league. Specifically, the league is made up of a diverse group of athletes from different neighborhoods, schools, and ability levels. However, the coaches help to foster a positive social environment with a high degree of peer acceptance, teamwork, and cooperation. The league also helps to bring diverse groups of peers together to form new friendships:

> You have kids of parents who are very high end professionals and then you have kids who really can barely probably afford to pay the $10 to play … the diversity of the kids playing within the team is really pretty amazing because sitting on the bench again you have this whole range of walks of life … what really brings them all together is the sport. I mean this kid doesn't know that mom and dad are living below the poverty line, this kid doesn't know mom and dad are physicians … and they don't care, all they care about is that they're putting on the same jersey and they're going out and they're playing a 45 minute game of basketball and high fiving each other. (C08)

The third and final relationship type is that of the family. Particularly, given the longstanding history of the league, a participatory tradition exists among many families in the league. It is common for multiple generations of family members to participate in the league in various roles; many current coaches were previously players in the past, while they now coach their own children in the league.

Setting

Coaches discussed several unique elements of the environment in which the league exists. In terms of the sport structure, it was highlighted that the league fosters an adaptive view of competition, whereby games themselves are competitive, but no long-term forms of competition (e.g. playoffs,

Table 1. Overview and description of identified themes.

Component	Themes	Descriptions	Sample Quotations
Activities	Opportunity to play	Single practice at beginning of season; focus on play through weekly games	'The second we start having practices it becomes more competitive, and I like that right now the kids can actually just come and play and relax without the threat of being a perfectionist all the time.' C02
	Experiential learning	Athletes develop sport skills through playing rather than explicit instruction	'This is what they signed up for, and honest, sometimes the best way for some kids to learn is just to scrimmage.' C09
	Youth-driven	Coaches and referees enforce rules and teach basic skills, but athletes are given autonomy to be creative and dictate the play	'A couple of them play club basketball, but they love coming back and playing here because they don't have all that pressure of being told what to do. Here they can just be themselves and not be stressed out.' C02
Social relationships	Coaches	Opportunities to foster close and supportive relationships with coaches	'It's important to talk to them, maybe not always at a basketball level, but to see what is going with them as people, and see what I can do to help.' C01
	Peers	Peer acceptance, new friendships, cooperation, and teamwork	'On my team, they are very encouraging to others, they don't hog the ball, and they pass to everyone … and that's very important to see.' C07
	Family	Participatory tradition within families; many parents coach own children	'My brother used to play and then he started coaching, so I'd come down to help out too. My cousins used to help coach too, they used to be my coaches, so it just kind of ran in the family.' C05
Sport setting	True competition	Games are competitive, but no standings are kept, and no playoffs at end of season	'It is much gentler in its message of failure. We are not emphasizing winning so it is about the reflection and gentle feedback.' C03
	Equal and fair play	Equal playing time regardless of game situation; re-balancing of teams mid-season to ensure even competition	'The organizers do a really nice job of dividing players up in terms of ability and in terms of friendships so that the teams are balanced, and then at some point in the year they may shift people around so that there's good balance.' C08
	Individualized recognition	Weekly player awards; all scorers published in local newspaper and online	'I think everybody walks a little taller, everybody gets a player of the week [award] at some point in the year, and surprisingly enough it's amazing to all of them when they get it. I don't think they catch on that everyone of them gets it so everybody walks away feeling a little bit more successful and they're more confident in their ability to play game.' C08
	Unique niche	Distinct yet complementary role to more competitive club basketball programs	'We've got kids that are playing in our program who are also playing club ball and that's just great. They understand that when they get to be down here with us they can relax and have fun.' C05
Environmental setting	Affordable	Low cost provides opportunity for wide range of youth to participate	'With elite teams you are not necessarily seeing the best groups of an age level. It is the kids who have been given the opportunity to be the best. Then I think that all of those kids that I have seen and who I coach who could have been there too but they just never have the

Table 1. Continued.

Component	Themes	Descriptions	Sample Quotations
			opportunity to carry on. So, I think the big thing is that its just made me think about how pursuing sports on an elite level is really based on resources.' C03
	Accessible	Location is easily reached by local underserved youth	'We have people say that we should be out in the suburbs and not at our school downtown, or that we should have online registration. Well, that's not our audience, not everyone has the internet. We want to cater to the kid that comes in with ten dollars in quarters.' C05
	Inclusive	Diverse groups of athletes from wide range of demographics and abilities	'It brings together a lot of different members of the community together. Sometimes there's people that are a little different than you, but that doesn't make them any less than a person than you are. I think that is an incredible lesson for the kids.' C10
Social setting	Community ties	Sense of community; connection with local businesses and organizations	'A lot of local businesses and schools know about our reputation and they seek us out, and from that point on I keep tapping them year after year to keep helping out.' C05
	Volunteering and commitment	League is entirely volunteer-based, a strong core of whom have been committed to the league for many years	'So many people had been here for decades before I got involved. The administration has been running the league for so long, and they're so committed that I think that it reflects itself in the program.' C09
	Tradition and continuity	History of league and continuity over time cultivates sense of familiarity and family among past and present members	'When I was a player I'd referee and scorekeep and it just doesn't change. It's always been a family. After fifteen years you come back and it feels the same, like you never even left.' C07
Immediate experiences	Fun/enjoyment	League slogan is 'Just for the fun of it'. Coaches view fun and enjoyment as a real-time outcome that they can readily assess among their players	'It is most important that the kids are having fun. I think it's important that my players know that the people that coached and refereed me are still here because they enjoy it … they help out and keep the league going.' C04
Short-term outcomes	Competence	Development of basic fundamental basketball skills and knowledge	'I like to see my kids progress in their skills, but it doesn't matter to me if they win or lose. If they work hard and develop skills that they can take other places, then that's my philosophy.' C06
	Confidence	Self-confidence in one's abilities	'It's important for them at this stage in life to find their strengths. Confidence is probably the key component and that's something you can take forward in life.' C11
	Connection	New and lasting friendships, social skills, leadership, and teamwork	'I see kids coming out of their shells that are sort of reserved or shy at school because they might not have the money or opportunities that other kids do. But then they show up at this thing, everyone puts the same shirt on, they all look the same, and it really helps to build social skills and new friendships.' C08
	Character	Sportspersonship and respect for peers, coaches, and referees	'They learn the game, learn to respect officials, learn to respect the game, and each other.' C12

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued.

Component	Themes	Descriptions	Sample Quotations
Long-term outcomes	Contribution	Common for former athletes to give back to league through volunteering	' … he referees and coaches because he wanted to give something back to the league rather than keep playing. So that's a kid who I want to groom and bring back year after year.' C05
–	Structural challenges	Limited opportunities for skill development and motivation	'The weakness is that we need more instructional time to actually develop good habits and fundamental skills. We just don't have the time, but I think that trade-off with offering a positive experience is worth it.' C03

standings) exist. All coaches also aim to treat the athletes equitably; playing time is equalized for all athletes, regardless of ability level, or game situation. In addition, the unique contributions of each athlete is recognized through weekly player awards for fair play, and games scores published in the local newspaper complete with a full list of scorers. This provides further opportunities for the league to create positive experiences for its athletes, beyond just winning as is described below:

> I would say it's 90% fun, maybe 10% winning because everybody loves to win and nobody likes to feel like they've lost, but if they lose I think kids still feel really good about the experience because there's the player of the week that the kids experience, and anybody that gets a basket in the game gets their name in the newspaper, there's so many other positive experiences for the kids within the game beyond winning and losing. (C08)

The unique position of the league in relation to other competitive club organizations was also highlighted by numerous coaches. Rather than viewing the recreational focus of the league as a shortcoming in comparison to competitive clubs, coaches highlighted that it could instead be viewed as a unique strength. One coach succinctly described this notion from his own personal experiences as a player in the league:

> It starts back from when I was a player, knowing that I could come here and knowing there was no pressure. I played competitive sports as well but it was just nice to come and not feel any pressure. Or you know, know that you're not going to be pulled off your line because you've done something wrong. So I think that's the big thing, I think that everybody deserves a chance, and here they get that chance. (C07)

One of the strengths of the league is that it is designed to be both accessible and affordable to a wide range of youth. There is only a nominal 10 dollar registration fee to take part in the league, which was recently doubled from 5 dollars. Throughout the league's 60 year existence, it has been hosted (free of charge) at an elementary school located in a low income neighborhood, in order to make the league as accessible as possible to local youth. Although the league originally targeted local underserved youth, its popularity now attracts a diverse group of athletes from across the city:

> You are going to see a picture somewhere of a group of kids all with big smiles on their faces, and they are all going to be different ethnicities, different ages, different genders, all in a group. And it is so very powerful. The strength of the program is that it is able to replicate that year after year. (C06)

The social structure of the league also extends beyond its inclusiveness and focuses on a strong sense of community. The league is able to continue operating with minimal registration fees because it is entirely volunteer-run. A strong and growing core of volunteers have been passionately involved with the league for decades, and cultivate a strong sense of community among everyone involved. One coach discussed how volunteers truly enjoy helping out:

> You are not begging people to volunteer, you are getting volunteers that want to be there and they're just staying … they'll help out in whatever way I can … they are clearly doing it because they like it. They wouldn't do it for 10 or 15 years if they didn't like it. (C01)

In addition, the league has developed many beneficial ties with local businesses and organizations who donate money or resources which help to keep the league in operation.

Immediate sport experiences

Although not a part of Côté, Turnnidge, and Vierimaa's (2016) original framework, this section describes athletes' real-time experiences or immediate outcomes of their sport participation. In contrast to the short and long-term outcomes discussed below, which may not be manifested for months or years, these sport experiences are readily observed and experienced in real time. At its core, the league is designed to provide opportunities for its players to have fun while learning basic basketball skills. This simple mandate was well described by one coach:

> Kids are out there having a great time, they're enjoying themselves, they really don't necessarily follow their points on the scoreboard or the total points on the scoreboard at the end of the game, they've just gone out, they've had a great time, they're constantly asking can I go back in, can I go back in. (C09)

From the coaches' perspectives, the simple act or process of playing basketball is what is most enjoyable for athletes, rather than the outcome of a given game.

Short-term outcomes

In comparison to the preceding section, short-term outcomes may be realized over a slightly longer period of time (e.g. one season). Competence was the most commonly referenced short-term outcome, and was discussed by every participant. The coaches discussed how the league intends to foster the development of basic fundamental basketball skills among all athletes. In addition, coaches mentioned that athletes acquire an overall sense of self-confidence in their abilities, both on and off the basketball court. One coach discussed how building competence and confidence can lead to sport opportunities in other contexts: 'They need to learn how to make a lay-up, but they have also gained confidence to maybe now go and try out for their elementary [school] team' (C07).

The coaches discussed the notion of connection in that athletes develop life-long friendships with their peers, and gain valuable athlete leadership skills. Indeed, the diverse group of athletes in the league appears to be conducive to fostering the development of enriching relationships among teammates, which even seem to transcend the boundaries of the league:

> Now they all know each other when they are playing in high school, there is a face on them and you know who they are. There is a more positive relationship that you have with your opponent … they will have that positive interaction of when they used to play together. (C03)

Coaches also tried to develop social and leadership skills among their athletes, as exemplified by a coach's description of the growth of a particular player: 'She's more vocal, she'll tell the girls on the court "be here, do this" and you can see it, she's grown up through the league' (C02). Coaches also discussed how learning to work as part of a team was one of the most important skills that athletes develop, which they can then apply to other aspects of their lives.

Finally, the concept of character was discussed in that the league appears to foster both sportspersonship and respect among its young athletes. The absence of standings or playoffs aids in coaches' downplaying of the outcomes of individual games, regardless of whether they are wins or losses. Coaches discussed the importance of respect, respect for the game, each other, coaches, as well as officials. These positive values are imparted through role modeling by coaches and other strategies. For example: 'I would designate two players each game, at the end of every game they had to go shake hands with the referee and say thank you' (C07). The coaches staunchly believed that these character values were important to impart within this particular sport context since it is many athletes' first exposure to organized sport. By providing athletes with a solid base of skills and values, they are better equipped for successful long-term participation in basketball and sport as a whole.

Long-term outcome

Given that this league represents many young athletes' first and only opportunity to participate in organized team sport, coaches expressed how it is crucial to nurture athletes' love for the game, and provide youth with a foundational skill-set for a life time of participation in sport and physical activity. However, above and beyond performance and participation, all of the coaches mentioned one over-arching, long-term outcome of participation in the league: Contribution. This notion signifies an internal desire for athletes to give back to their league and the broader community. Coaches primarily discussed this notion in the sense that players are encouraged to volunteer with the league, and that it is common for players to begin coaching once they are too old to play themselves, which is even evident in the present sample since half of the coaches interviewed previously played in the league as athletes. Since athletes often have a positive experience in the league as players, they want to ensure that future generations have similar opportunities: 'I think that is a really important part of it, to give back to them as they gave to you, because the league gave me so much as a young player' (C12). This pervasive selflessness has helped to ensure that there will always be many volunteers to help keep the league running for years to come. Although there is a strong culture of giving back to the league, coaches also mentioned that this has also led to them volunteering with other community organizations: 'I wouldn't have gotten involved in United Way if I hadn't had this as a base. That's what this league has instilled in me, if there's an opportunity to give back to the league, I'll do it' (C05).

Structural challenges

Although coaches generally had overwhelmingly positive perceptions of the league, they did identify a number of challenges. All of the coaches acknowledged and agreed with the league's emphasis on fun, but several coaches also discussed how an overriding focus on fun may come at the expense of athletes' skill development and motivation. One coach discussed the potential benefits of competition:

> A lot of kids are also motivated by competition and that is a good way to help develop skills as well. I think it's adding up like, a little bit of competition helps. Like, obviously, a balance … healthy competition. (C12)

Since each team has only a single practice session at the beginning of the season, coaches identified that this affords limited opportunities for instruction and strategizing. This limited contact time with the athletes forced coaches to optimize their interactions with their players, in order to build strong coach-athlete relationships and effectively influence their team's development. However, overall coaches agreed that while the league may not be perfect, it presented local youth with a tremendously positive sport opportunity, which is well summarized by the following quote:

> There are probably as many people who will trash the league. Parents will trash it because it's not competitive enough, because it is not intense enough, or there isn't enough instruction. I also think that people who, if they really stopped to think about the whole idea, I think it would really help their kid. But they are so focused on that pathway for their kid and the competitiveness and where they want the sport to take their kid. They miss that message about just letting your kid play a game, and see the joy in them being able to play. (C03)

Discussion

The present study investigated coaches' perceptions of a successful community youth basketball program. Specifically, we aimed to describe the league's structure, examine coaches' perceptions of perceived developmental changes among athletes, and to use the Personal Assets Framework (Côté, Turnnidge, and Vierimaa 2016) to help explain the mechanisms and outcomes through which youth development occurs in this setting. The results have yielded insight into the design and implementation of sustainable and effective community youth sport programs. Lerner (2004b)

suggests that the enhancement of PYD over time ultimately leads to the individual making positive contributions to oneself, community, family, and society. The basketball league developed a culture of contribution through coaches' encouragement of graduating players to stay involved as volunteers, underscoring the importance of supportive adult relationships to PYD (Camiré, Trudel, and Forneris 2012; Lerner 2004b). Other sport programs should be encouraged to 'look within' when building a base of volunteers, as previous research suggests that recruiting from within a sport program is indeed an effective strategy to ensure its long-term sustainability (Hallmann 2015). The ongoing existence and success of the league is predicated on this continued motivation to give back to the league, ensuring that the next generation of young players will have the same positive experiences. Actively encouraging youth to volunteer nurtures their leadership skills and exposes them to opportunities to develop coaching skills at a relatively young age. This continued involvement has also created a strong sense of community and collective or social identity among league members past and present.

This study presents an encouraging outlook for community sport programs, as it suggests that it may not be necessary to devote sizeable resources toward explicitly teaching PYD principles or life skills to be effective. Instead, by simply providing youth with a safe context in which to participate in appropriate sport activities and develop supportive social relationships, sport programs can create positive sport experiences for young athletes, which can in turn have long-term implications on their personal development. Indeed, while coaches explicitly described facilitating a culture of contribution, youth's development in other areas (i.e. the 4 Cs) seemed to occur implicitly. The coaches did not receive any PYD-specific training; rather, they simply were expected to uphold the league's shared values, which helped to creative a positive developmental context. This process aligns with recent research in Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu where social support and the values and characteristics inherent to the sport facilitated the implicit acquisition of life skills (Chinkov and Holt 2016).

A secondary aim of this study was to test the utility of the Personal Assets Framework (Côté, Turnnidge, and Vierimaa 2016) as a means of describing PYD outcomes and the mechanisms through which PYD occurs. The inductively coded themes generally aligned with the framework; however, a number of unique aspects of the league were identified, which led to two adaptations to the framework's structure (see Figure 1).

Whereas Côté, Turnnidge, and Vierimaa (2016) conceptualized the dynamic elements as three separate entities, findings from the present study suggest that sport activities and social relationships are better conceptualized as nested within the broader sport setting. Indeed, features of the setting such as a focus on short-term competition and inclusivity influence both the nature of the league's games and the relationships among its members. This ecological perspective shares similarities with previous research which has emphasized the salience of community factors in athlete development (e.g. Balish and Côté 2014). In many ways, the league described in the present study aligns with the successful rural sporting community examined by Balish and Côté (2014). Although the present study examined a specific league in a much larger city, it is similarly made accessible to local youth, has a strong and stable base of volunteers, and is well integrated within the community. This suggests that it may be possible to cultivate community factors that characterize successful small communities in larger city centers.

Coaches also revealed that they predominantly focused on facilitating positive immediate sport experiences, in line with the league's goal of ensuring that all players have fun. This is critical because this league represents many athletes' first or only exposure to organized sport. Most sport PYD research identifies a set of tangible developmental outcomes associated with sport participation (e.g. 4 Cs); however, the mechanisms through which these outcomes are realized are not well understood (Turnnidge, Côté, and Hancock 2014). Positive immediate sport experiences (described as fun and enjoyment in the present study) may help explain this relationship, as the experience of fun can lead to continued sport participation over time (Visek et al. 2015). In addition, it is believed that coaches play an essential role in promoting fun in organized youth sport through creating a positive learning environment (Bengoechea, Strean, and Williams 2004; Visek et al. 2015).

Recreational sport contexts are traditionally viewed as opportunities for social interaction, exercise, and enjoyment (Trudel and Gilbert 2006). However, findings from this study demonstrate that recreational sport can still include a competitive element, and that this may even work to enhance, rather than undermine, athletes' enjoyment. Indeed, the excitement of competition is often identified as a major source of enjoyment among young athletes (Wiersma 2001), and the present study suggests that it remains an integral component of the sport, even in recreational contexts. Competition itself may be neither inherently positive nor negative; rather, how competition is structured and implemented in a sport setting may determine how it influences athletes. Community sport programs should aim to nurture competition by downplaying the outcome (i.e. winning and losing) and emphasizing the process of competing as a means of fostering athletes' enjoyment and building of character (Shields and Bredemeier 2009).

Coaches also emphasized the diversity of the league's athletes. For many, the league represents an introduction to organized basketball, while many experienced others concurrently participate in developmental club leagues. This forces athletes to learn to interact with new groups of peers, forging new friendships and expanding social networks (Holt et al. 2008). This is particularly critical for the disadvantaged youth participating in the league, as they may not otherwise have many opportunities for social interactions outside of school and family (Holt et al. 2011). This assortment of abilities also allows opportunities for peer-facilitated learning through scaffolding, whereby less skilled players gain skills and expertise from their more highly skilled peers, who develop leadership skills (Balish and Côté 2014).

Limitations of this study include the exclusive reliance on the perceptions of coaches to provide a description of a youth basketball league. Future research should explore coaches' behavior in greater detail, which could be accomplished using systematic or participant observation approaches. Additionally, future studies could consider perspectives of other members of the sport environment, including athletes and parents, as each contribute unique perspectives. Although coaches described how they believed that they were able to influence their athletes' development, there was no actual assessment of developmental outcomes. Thus, future studies may consider a longitudinal design whereby changes in developmental outcomes could be studied over the course of a season. However, while it was not possible to directly examine the league's long-term history using a longitudinal design, by sampling former participants and coaches these individuals were able to share perceptions which are formed in part by their past experiences in the league. It is suggested that youth sport settings characterized by true competition are considered fertile contexts for character development (Shields and Bredemeier 1995), providing some support for recreational sport as a context for PYD. Although research has yet to explicitly examine this notion, it remains a fruitful avenue of future study to further our understanding of the contextual and structural factors underpinning PYD in sport. Finally, given the unique characteristics of the league, the generalizability of the findings to other community sport settings may be limited. In particular, it is not evident that the characteristics and perceived benefits of participation in the league would be consistent across other community sport programs.

Although the general principles that underlie the success of this model league are consistent with features of sport programs that lead to PYD (e.g. Strachan, Côté, and Deakin 2011), future research should consider other model community sport programs to corroborate the key features of this specific sport context. In doing so, the resultant evidence could be implemented in the development of youth sport programs to optimize athletes' personal development. At this stage, rather than emphasize the specific features of this league, it may be more important to consider how the sum of these features align to create an adaptive sport context. Just as this league prioritized fun over elite performance, it is important to remember that no sport context is without limitations. As such, sport programs should develop a clear understanding of their own identity and goals, and work to a create a context characterized by activities, social relationships and setting features that will help to lead to their realization.

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