

Coaches', Athletes', and Parents' Perceptions of Fun in Youth Sports: Assumptions about Learning and Implications for Practice

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Children often say fun is the primary reason they play youth sports (e.g., Ewing & Seefeldt, 1990; Wankel & Sefton, 1989). Yet there is relatively little information about specific characteristics that increase children's fun in youth sport. One-hundred forty-seven participants (11 coaches, 19 parents, and 117 children) completed concept maps (Novak & Gowan, 1984) and 17 participants (3 coaches, 5 parents, and 9 children) were interviewed to explore perceptions about what enhances and detracts from children's fun during youth sport experiences in practice and competition. Although participants had differences in their views, all groups seemed to accept assumptions about the apparent conflict between skill development and fun. Results suggested the "core assumption" was that "drills are boring" and "games (both in practice and for competition) are fun." Consequently, the conceptual framework from Teaching Games for Understanding (Bunker & Thorpe, 1982) is offered as a means to help coaches enhance children's fun in youth sport.

Les enfants expliquent souvent que la pratique du sport leur apporte du plaisir (voir par exemple Ewing et Seefeldt, 1990; Wankel et Sefton, 1989). Pourtant, on connaît mal les caractéristiques précises qui rehaussent le plaisir des enfants dans la pratique du sport. Dans cette étude, l'auteur a demandé à 147 participants (c'est-à-dire 11 entraîneurs, 19 parents et 117 enfants) de remplir des schémas conceptuels (Novak et Gowan, 1984) en plus de rencontrer 17 participants (3 entraîneurs, 5 parents et 9 enfants) pour cerner les éléments qui rehaussent le plaisir des enfants qui pratiquent un sport ou y nuisent, tant durant l'entraînement que les compétitions. Malgré leurs différences d'opinions, les participants reconnaissent le conflit habituel entre l'acquisition d'habiletés et le plaisir. Les résultats de cette étude indiquent que les prémisses retenues sont que «les exercices sont ennuyants» et les «parties sont amusantes» (tant en entraînement qu'en compétition). Conséquemment, l'auteur propose de recourir au cadre conceptuel de l'enseignement des jeux en vue de leur compréhension (Bunker et Thorpe, 1982) pour aider les entraîneurs à rehausser le plaisir que tirent les enfants de la pratique des sports.

To have fun in sport means to be totally involved, seeking pleasure from participation by oneself or with others. However, in some instances, the fun aspect is being taken out of junior sport, often by the actions of some well-meaning adults (Robertson, 1983, p. 1).

Participation motivation research (e.g., Ewing & Seefeldt, 1990) has shown consistently that children participate in youth sport programs "to have fun" as their primary objective. Although recent commentary (Kimiecik & Hams, 1996; Wankel, 1997) has raised conceptual/definitional concerns about the meaning of fun and enjoyment, it remains clear that children are seeking positive experiences that they would classify as "fun." Some researchers have argued fun and enjoyment are often used synonymously in youth sport "because 'fun' is often the word children use for 'enjoyment'" (Scanlan & Simons, 1992, p. 203). Nevertheless, considerable research has suggested fun is a predominant reason for participation in youth sport (e.g., Burton & Martens, 1986; Gould, Horn, & Weiss, 1984; Scanlan & Simons, 1992; Wankel & Kreisel, 1985). Others have suggested girls participate for the social aspect, and, at a competitive level, girls found working toward their athletic goals a primary motivator (e.g., Boyd, Trudel, & Donohue, 1997). But, this could still be perceived as a source of fun for those children. Accordingly, the purpose of this study was to consider parents', coaches', and children's perceptions about what enhances and detracts from fun in youth sport experience from practice to competitive settings.

If parents and youth sport coaches are to help young athletes to achieve their goal of having fun, it is helpful to understand what characteristics of youth sport tend to enhance and to detract from fun. Knowledge of what makes youth sport enjoyable for participants is a key to improving the quality of children's experiences. A desire to meet children's participation motives and developmental needs may provide enough provocation for many individuals both to consider how to maximise fun in youth sport and to determine what detracts from fun in youth sport. While some recent coaching texts have addressed the importance of participation (e.g., Martens, 1997) some current discourses still seem to discount the joy of participation. The screaming, must-win coach, parent, or child may not have disappeared with the appearance of new coaching texts. We would like to think that providing fun, safe, challenging, recreational experiences with one's friends is sufficient *raison d'être* for youth sport. As such, the Teaching Games for Understanding (TGFU) model (Bunker & Thorpe, 1982) became a conceptual focus of this study during data analysis, based on the participants' perceptions. We postulate this approach as both a theoretical underpinning for this research, and as a practical measure to help facilitate the necessary environment to maximise children's youth sport experience, in practice settings especially.

Although we maintain that youth sport's existence should not be entirely predicated on the outcomes it can produce, the discourse of health does offer another reason to attend to the fun that can be derived in youth sport. For example, Weiss (1993) highlighted the wider implications of enhancing fun from the perspective of physical activity for health. As Blair (1992) argued, 20% of children in the U.S. are probably at risk because of low fitness and he proposed that educators should make more vigorous efforts to help these children become more active. Children must have enjoyable experiences as an integral part of their involvement in order to sustain continued physical activity (Freedson & Rowland, 1992; Sallis & McKenzie, 1991). Therefore, Weiss (1993) argued we must turn children on to physical activity "by making it enjoyable so that they keep coming back because of their intrinsic motivation to be involved in physical activity" (p. 206).

What is Fun?

We do not intend, in this paper, to contribute significantly to the conceptual debates about fun and enjoyment, however, the concept of fun is a central underpinning factor of this study. For the sake of context then, we shall examine briefly how fun has been discussed. We do raise the issue that writers should not assert reflexively that fun and enjoyment are synonymous. For example, one might enjoy a good meal, but would not necessarily say it was a fun dinner. Although the definitions of fun and enjoyment may overlap considerably, we believe that fun is a subset of enjoyment. That is to say, all fun is enjoyable, but enjoyment cannot be simply categorised as fun. This is consistent with Scanlan and Simons (1992), who defined sport enjoyment as, "a positive affective response to the sport that reflects generalised feelings such as pleasure, liking and fun. This construct is more differentiated than global positive affect, but more general than a specific emotion such as excitement" (p. 202). Wankel and Sefton (1989) supported the idea that fun represents a general positive emotional state for young people. Although enjoyment is often used to indicate intrinsic motivation (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Deci & Ryan, 1985), Scanlan and Simons (1992) proposed enjoyment to be a broader and more inclusive construct. The term "fun" is used here, and signifies a positive emotional state that is a subset of enjoyment.

Sources of Fun/Enjoyment

A wide range of sources of fun and enjoyment has been revealed in sport settings, but may be directly related to motivation itself (Scanlan & Simons, 1992). Both situational and individual antecedents of fun in youth sport are important. Individual characteristics include: high perceptions of competence and high skill level (Chalip, Csikszentmihalyi, Kleiber, & Larson, 1984; Wankel & Sefton, 1989).

Situational influences include challenge of activity and elements of the activity itself (Chalip et al., 1984; Mandigo & Couture, 1996; Wankel & Sefton, 1989), social interactions (Brustad, 1988; Scanlan, Carpenter, Lobel, & Simons, 1993); positive parental interactions (Scanlan & Lewthwaite, 1988; Scanlan et al., 1993); and extrinsic rewards (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Wankel & Keisel, 1985). Winning does not appear to be as important to players' fun as performing well and facing realistic challenges in games where something is at stake (Wankel & Sefton, 1989). The implications of such findings suggest the emphasis of sport programs should be on involvement, skill development, and fun.

The TGFU approach was utilised here during data analysis as the core assumptions and perceptions of players, coaches, and parents became clearer. The adoption of the TGFU framework was based on the perception that skill-drills in practices were boring and both games in practices (scrimmages) and competitive games, were more fun. The TGFU approach has been analysed in detail elsewhere (see Werner, Thorpe, & Bunker, 1996). Basically, this approach focuses on the learner developing tactical game understanding in addition to skill development. The traditional "skill-drill" approach to practice may encourage the practice of movements divorced from the context in which they are to be applied in the game, giving little understanding of tactical issues (Streat, 1997). This approach contradicts fundamental principles of transfer and of the specificity of motor learning. Taking a skill that was learned in an isolated situation and attempting to apply it in a game context requires a shift in ability (Schmidt, 1988). Some evidence is available to show the benefits of a TGFU approach compared with a skill-drill method (e.g., Berkowitz, 1996) in physical education classes. Little is known about the effectiveness of different instructional approaches coaches employ in youth sport. Instructional approaches to practice may also reflect the way in which competitive games are approached; practice is, after all, preparation for a game.

Skill is a vital part of sports participation, and the ability to perceive a balance between the challenges inherent in an activity and the skills an individual has to meet those challenges has been regarded as important for positive psychological experiences (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). By understanding more about how and what parents, coaches, and, especially children perceive as sources of fun in youth sport, we may be in a better position to provide more positive experiences, and equip children with the necessary abilities to meet those challenges.

Rationale and Purpose

Much of the previous literature has used *a priori* categories when assessing children's fun. Furthermore, although adults usually plan, organise, and lead youth

sport programs, little has been done to examine the convergence and divergence between adults' and children's perceptions of fun in the youth sport context. This study was undertaken both (a) to allow participants to propose their own responses to what adds and detracts from fun in youth sport, and (b) to look at the different perspectives of children, parents, and coaches. When participants generate their own responses, the most salient factors tend to emerge. The data also can be compared to extant data with respect to potential consistencies, differences, and new categories. Knowing where adults and children align and diverge can be helpful in designing programs and interventions, which have often been based on the assumption that adults know what contributes to and what diminishes children's fun.

Method

Participants

A total of 164 participants provided data for this study. All participants were involved with a youth sport program at the time of data collection. Concept maps (Novak & Gowan, 1984) were completed by 147 participants (11 coaches, 19 parents, and 117 children). Providing details on the participants may be important to add to the depth of information and assessments about transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) suitable for qualitative research. Specifically, the following participants were involved in this study: A total of 117 athletes (21 male Under 17 volleyball, nine female Under 17 soccer, one female Under 15 soccer, one male Under 13 hockey, 11 male Under 13 soccer, 35 male and female Under 15 curling, 26 male and female Under 16 curling, 13 male and female Under 18 curling). The group of parents completing concept maps comprised nine parents of Under 17 soccer players, six parents of hockey players, four parents of Under 13 soccer players. In addition, 11 NCCP Level III certified coaches also completed concept maps.

Seventeen participants were interviewed in total. Nine athletes: eight from soccer (two females age 16, two females age 14, one male age 7, two males age 11, and one male age 13) and one from hockey (male age 11). Five parents were interviewed, four with children involved in youth soccer and one parent whose child played youth hockey. Three coaches were solicited, one from male Under 12 soccer, one from female Under 16 soccer, and one from developmental volleyball.

The Research Team

The research team comprised one faculty member, and three graduate students. All members of the research team had completed courses in qualitative research.

Three of the four researchers had previous experience in conducting interviews and field observations. The team met weekly for three months prior to data collection and weekly or biweekly during five months of data collection. During the first three months, we reviewed key aspects of qualitative data collection protocol (e.g., gaining entry, developing rapport), developed interview guides, and discussed methodological and conceptual issues related to studying fun in youth sport. The student members of the group were given readings on qualitative research, youth sport, and fun and enjoyment to complement the content from meetings. During data collection, we discussed ongoing challenges, continued to share ideas about effective data collection, and began to propose analytic codes and categories.

Gaining Entry and Consent

Each member of the research team began data collection by gaining entry (i.e., establishing relationships, communicating intent, obtaining necessary permission, becoming accepted within the context) with one youth sport team. This was usually achieved through contacting the coach and explaining the purposes of the research. Team members were then solicited at practice or game venues, and invited to participate in the study. Packets with informed consent forms and concept maps were distributed. Following the completion of the concept maps, some suitable participants were identified and invited to be interviewed.

Concept Maps

A concept map represents a series of relationships between concepts (Novak & Gowan, 1984). The map began from a seed concept, which was the specific sport for each participant (see Figure 1). A smiling face was placed to the right of the sport, where participants were instructed to put anything that added to their fun; a frowning face was placed to the left of the sport, where they were told to put anything that took away from their fun. Sample concept maps from an unrelated study were provided. Participants related concepts from the seed concepts, thus creating conceptual strands that radiated outwards. The concept maps became individual schematics representing participants' perceptions and understandings of their experiences. Concept maps were chosen as one means for data collection in this study because (a) they allow participants to actively construct their responses with little input from the researchers, (b) participants can provide their salient responses fairly quickly, and (c) they provide breadth of data to complement the depth of data obtained in interviews.

Interviews

Investigators also conducted depth-probe interviews with coaches, parents, and children. Interviewees were selected using purposive sampling (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and a willingness to participate in an interview. Three coaches, nine players, and five parents were interviewed (as highlighted in the demographic breakdown). There were multiple informal interviews with all participants during observation periods, along with at least one formal interview, lasting up to an hour and a half.

All formal interviews were taped and transcribed verbatim. Although we developed a series of questions designed to elicit comments about children's fun in youth sport, no formal interview guides were used during the interviews. The preparation of the research team and biweekly meetings ensured a level of agreement as to the questions being asked and the issues being discussed. Informal interview guides were used in a semi-structured format (notes, main guiding questions, probes), but not a prepared series of questions. Rather than simply conducting a verbal questionnaire, participants were allowed to discuss the subjects they found relevant in a more conversational style. The initial question was standardised though, to familiarise the participants with the setting, and to encourage them to talk freely. This "warm-up" question asked how long have participants had been playing/coaching/involved with the given sport. After this, the main general guiding question was based on perceptions of fun. A typical question would be, "what do you find the most fun aspects of playing?" This question was modified depending on whether the interviewee was a child, parent, or coach. Each interviewer asked questions and used probes depending on the flow of the conversation, but was aware of the general guiding question.

Figure 1. Fun In Soccer-A Concept Map: We are interested in your answer to "What is fun in soccer?" This can include anything about being on your team, practices, and games. Use the examples on the back to get an idea of what a concept map is. On the side with the sad face, put anything that takes away from your fun. On the side with the happy face, put anything that adds to your fun. Please feel free to ask us any questions.

Some sport psychology researchers have advocated the use of highly structured interviews to ensure the questions are asked in the same order (e.g., Gould, Finch, & Jackson, 1993). However, the flexible format allowed questions to be integrated with the natural ebb and flow of conversation. Therefore, while questions may not have been asked in the same order, the same topics were covered, but still participants had the freedom to explore areas the researchers may not have considered during the conception stage. This interview strategy is coherent with the approach suggested here to allow the participants to propose their own responses

to what adds to and detracts from fun in youth sports, rather than only imposing a *priori* researcher-defined categories.

Observations

In addition to the concept maps and interview data, observations were included as a method of data collection. Observations covered a variety of sports, both male and female, across a range of age and competition levels. The coaches and athletes represented a diverse range of preparation (novice to Provincial level coaches), age (athletes 7-18), and competitive level (recreational to Provincial). We also attended practices and/or competitions (depending on the competitive season) and we had informal interviews before and after sessions. One youth soccer team was observed by the principal investigator on six occasions, including practice and competitive situations. Female volleyball, soccer, and curling teams were observed in practice and competition on at least one occasion by the other members of the research team.

Field notes were focussed on observers' perceptions of events and informal exchanges between group members. These notes provided another data source to be added to the data set, and occasionally were used as a source of corroboration of other data collected.

Analysis

Qualitative data analysis was implemented to generate and select the themes on which the final report is presented. The principal investigator completed initial and focussed coding (Charmaz, 1995) of interview transcripts and concept maps and developed a set of codes to apply to the entire data set. For the purposes of this paper, the entire data set, including interview transcripts, observations, and field notes, was reviewed for all references to "drills," "practices," "learning new skills," and comments that could be instructive to coaches and parents in considering how to facilitate fun in youth sport. Constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was implemented as individual units developed as interacting categories. In this process, each data unit was compared and assigned categories based on the principal investigator's judgement of the similarities of one unit of meaning to another, based on the look/feel alike criteria advanced by Lincoln and Guba (1985). As several cards became grouped together, propositional statements could be developed to convey the meaning contained in the data units. These categories developed as the broad themes of the study. These themes are not in themselves the outcome of the study, but a simplification, a means to get at a notion (van Manen, 1997).

The process of data analysis was an ongoing one, as new questions redirected the process of inquiry from events that unfolded in the field to theoretical concepts. As such, during the analysis of the data, salient theoretical concepts were considered as various data themes were developed. The core assumption regarding the perception of "boring drills" as opposed to "fun games" led us to consider the TGFU approach.

Results

The results of the study will be presented by offering a general overview of the findings and then focussing on the findings that address the issue of learning in practice situations. Whereas children, parents, and coaches differed in their perspectives on many issues, they consistently converged in their assumptions about the relation of skill development and fun. These assumptions have implications for teaching and learning in youth sport. Results from the concept maps will be presented to give an overview (see [Table 1](#)) and then excerpts from transcripts and comments will be used to provide greater elaboration and context.

In looking at the perspectives of players, coaches, and parents, we hope to show both the recurring idea that games and game-like activities are perceived to be fun, yet drills are seen to be inevitable, but not fun. The presentation of the essential themes is the framework used to present data in this regard.

The Core Assumption: Games Are More Fun Than Drills *Players' Perspectives.*

Interviewer (I): What about some of your practices or parts of practices that make it more fun?

Player: Scrimmaging is the best.

This soccer player was clear on the most fun parts of practice. In fact, data from both concept maps and interviews indicated players' perceptions of fun in practice were based on playing games (scrimmages). Another soccer player said:

I: What would make [a game or practice] really fun?

Player: Uh, I don't know. I like scrimmaging yep. Or do different parts of it. Like the way you do a scrimmage is like you are throwing it and you can only take one step. It's different, like it's not [the full game] but [it's modified].

Players made a distinction between scrimmages and "real" games, though. One Under 11 soccer player realised the difference in his experiences, saying, "The

games . . . it is really fun and it is scrimmages but it is a lot more [sic]." Real games may offer more, but scrimmages in practice were perceived as the most fun aspects by players.

Coaches' perspectives. Coaches showed some understanding that children find games and game-like activities to be more fun than many of the drills they used, but they still maintained a belief that such drills must be done.

Coach (C): It's more fun with a ball than without, if you have just straight running, some of the girls just won't do it. But if you, you can do drills with the ball, you can do the same amount of running but you're doing it with a ball it makes it a little different.

By adding a ball to a "boring drill," this coach suggested practices were more fun for his female soccer players. Adding a ball may be more reflective of a game situation. Another soccer coach, at what he perceived as a level where competition was becoming more intense, portrayed a slightly different view:

I think once they've honed their skills to the point where it doesn't become a chore anymore, they can have fun doing what they're doing . . . I mean, the practice goes along with it. I mean, it becomes . . . it's a chore because some of these kids are learning something new. They'll always because they're . . . especially if . . . a lot of them out there learning stuff that they haven't done before, probably have never seen or maybe they've seen on TV but they've never been able to do because they've never been taught how.

In addition, this coach, who was working with 11 and 12 year olds, proposed a justification for putting players in lines and doing things that they would not think was fun.

At this level, I think [we go] beyond trying to make them have fun at it. If they're not having fun playing the game now, because at this level it's gone past the point of just bringing the kids together to enjoy the sport anymore. They're still enjoying the sport, but they're also learning a whole new concept about the sport. They're learning to be more professional at the sport, to learn as much as we can about the sport, and to use what they're learning. They're no longer there to be there because their friend is there.

It is notable how this coach seems to separate the concepts of learning and fun, or enjoyment. His 11 and 12 year-old players face demands of professionalism, not expectations of fun or social engagement. This coach's view of how to develop

players portrays an approach that was also discussed by parents and players from their viewpoint, and as such is a salient aspect of the data collected.

Parents' perspectives. Several of the parents showed insight into their children's preferences and experiences. A "soccer mom" commented on her son's preferences during practice:

Parent (P) 1: He loves the scrimmages, and he loves one-on-one drills. He just loves that. The endurance part of it is what he doesn't like. You know, running around for five or ten minutes; that kind of stuff.

Other parents concurred with this view of their children:

P2: Brian loves the scrimmage; he loves to play the game.

P3: Sam doesn't really like the drill in practices.

P4: The scrimmages are the best parts for the kids. That is what they want to do; they would all do this other stuff, but they want to scrimmage.

A common idea or strand of perception from players, coaches, and parents seems to be that scrimmages are fun. Additionally though, there is a perceived need to foster some level of skill development, from the coaches in particular. The coaches described the need for drills to incorporate this skill development, but this seems to be at odds with the elements of participation where players have most fun. As one parent discussed:

I: If you said to them, "What would you do to make it more fun for you? Practices, , games, anything about being on the soccer team - what things would you do?"

P3: Sam would say, "Have more scrimmage."

It became progressively clear that coaches, parents, and players held a belief that "boring drills" are a necessary part of learning a sport.

Player: More fun where I would have more scrimmage but you still need to do the drills I guess. More scrimmage, that is about it. I know you have to have some practice.

Parent: I think, too, maybe at the beginning Seth expected they would leave all the basic drills behind and they would start with something more interesting. In the first couple of practices he said, "We're doing all these basic drills over and over." And he said, "I could do them, you know, in the last league." And I said, "Obviously, you guys need to practice them to get better, to improve."

The following is from an interview with two soccer parents of Under 13 boys:

I: I'm hearing that they would like practices better if there were more scrimmages or more things like scrimmages.

P1: Yeah, they probably would say that and they would probably like practices better, but I don't think that's necessarily what the practice is all about.

P2: Yeah, and I think they would see that - that's not the point of a practice, you know, it's just to be having fun all the time.

P1: Like I say, Jeff likes one-on-one drills and I don't know if they do much of that because I haven't watched a practice at this level ...

P2: I think they realise that they have to do certain things, certain of these drills, because it translates onto the play, into the game ... He would play soccer three hours a day if he could.

Scrimmage as a Reward

A Second key theme articulated by all stakeholders, and integrally tied to the previous core assumption, is that playing or scrimmage is a reward for co-operating during the "boring drills." Playing a game at the end of practice can be viewed sometimes as a behavioural control to make sure the players do the drills. A number of those interviewed felt a scrimmage is the reward, after players have worked at "their skills". As one parent stated:

I think too, is that, children know that there's going to be a scrimmage at the end. You know it makes them more enthusiastic about the practice. They know what's coming after. I know in basketball - I'm not sure about these coaches, but ... Mitch's coach always used to say, you know, "Five more minutes of this", and "So many more of these", and "If it goes really well, then we'll have a scrimmage." Well, of course, then they would work really hard and it would go really, really well, but I think that.

The players also understood this concept of scrimmage as a reward. One player noted, "well they like to have a scrimmage if you do well during the practice." A coach described the way he used this reward system as a chance for the players to have fun:

You have to set aside, I think, some period in there where they can have fun doing what they've learned.... This is where we try to always set aside, I don't know, fifteen, twenty minutes, a half hour maybe, at the end of the practice - a fun type thing, where they can actually ... play games because their idea of fun is going out and playing the game itself. . . And then thereby giving them a practice game at the end. Its their reward, I think.

The perception seems to be that there is no coaching, or learning to be done in the scrimmage. The scrimmage is the opportunity to put into a game the skills that have been practised in the session before. As the coach quoted above thought, it gives his players the chance to say, "OK, now we can use it [the skill we have practised]."

In summary, persistent themes from players, parents, and coaches reflected assumptions about how practices must be or ought to be and about what is fun in practice situations. The spirit of many young athletes' sentiments was captured by one player who stated, "I wake up early for a game. We have a lot of early soccer games, but practices are so much different because you enjoy games and don't like practices."

Discussion

Learning new skills is a major component of fun in youth sport, which is linked with the motive of competence and achievement. Yet, much of what occurs in youth sport with the intent to foster skill development is done in ways that detract from children's fun. We believe that the root of the issue exists in an invalid assumption about teaching and learning in the context of youth sport. The goal of this discussion is to explore teaching and learning in youth sport, in light of the present data, with the intent of opening possibilities for coaches to facilitate fun in practice settings.

The data from the concept maps, interviews, and observations strongly supported the view that the dominant model of "skill development" or teaching sports includes teaching "the how" before "the why". That is to say, the typical practice included teaching isolated skills before trying to put them into a game context. Some of the coaches in particular realised a need to improve the ability of their players, so that they would be better equipped to be more confident in the game. In response to this perceived need was a tendency to focus on isolated skill development more than on tactical issues or game understanding.

Toward Teaching Games For Understanding

One parent described the way Mitch's coach promised a scrimmage if the children tried hard at the drills. Table 1 highlights some coaches' perceptions that games are fun and can help to develop skills. The recurring factors from the data presented here seem to reflect that games are fun, practices are boring. But, fun games seem to be a reward for trying hard at boring practices. Does this assumption lead to the most effective teaching and learning?

Scrimmages were used as rewards for trying hard at learning new skills, rather than opportunities for the development of game skills or tactics. Yet we assert learning can still take place through playing of games, for both practice and competition. This assumption led to the adoption of the TGFU framework, which is not just playing a game, but a way of learning and teaching that focuses on realistic game situations, tactical understanding, and decision-making skills. In implementing a TGFU approach, players may still have the fun of the scrimmage, and coaches the satisfaction of improving their players' abilities.

Physical education teachers may have been quicker to adopt the TGFU movement as an aid to improving the movement experiences of their pupils, but perhaps there is a persisting discourse amongst coaches that they must teach skills, rather than "just let them play". Divorcing a skill from the context in which it is learned requires a shift of ability (Schmidt, 1988). Such an approach has assumed the necessity for enabling skills to be developed before the game could be played, resulting in an emphasis on physical ability rather than game understanding (Bailey & Almond, 1983). Yet, we continue to see many practices that seem to ignore this issue. The key shift that we are advocating is one that will put "the why" before "the how" and will place skills in game contexts, which include a tactical component. Participants in this study perceived learning skills in the form of games as fun. If games are fun, the incorporation of games into practices, using the framework for tactical and skill development advocated by a TGFU approach may enhance experiences of fun.

Skill development is still a major focus of coaching, but incorporating the TGFU model means teaching skills as they would be performed in a game. Berkowitz (1996) compared a tactical teaching approach with a skill development approach, and found that "the tactical approach students were able to maintain possession of the ball and support one another during game play, while the skill development students had difficulty maintaining possession and moving to support the player with the ball" (p. 44).

Proponents of the TGFU approach the introduction of game-like experiences early in the teaching-learning process so that it provides students with a substantive knowledge base, and a clearer frame of reference for learning about the critical aspects of game play (Turner & Martinek, 1995). Coaches and educators need to know what knowledge to teach. "Coaches would not need to reflect to gain declarative knowledge, but rather should reflect on declarative knowledge to improve procedural knowledge" (Abraham & Collins, 1998, p. 73). But how should skill be taught and what is the best way to teach and implement this knowledge?

Arguments for the effectiveness of the TGFU approach to improve learning are, in our view, resolute. However, the assumptions highlighted in this study reflect games playing as a source of fun in practice situations for youth sports players. Thorpe (1992) proposed the teacher might believe that skill-based sessions are having a positive influence on students because some immediate skill development can be seen, but the social and skill-related interactions may convince students of their lack of ability. The factors said to enhance youth sport experiences here do not discount the importance of skill-learning, but highlight perceptions of how fun can be enhanced in the learning of those skills. Berkowitz (1996) reflected when she used a TGFU style "Students come in excited, positive and ready to go because they know they are going to get to play a game. I no longer hear "Are we going to play a game today?" (p. 45). The traditional behaviour control maxim, that "if you are good today, we will finish with a game" may have been lost, but students may have had more fun and been more motivated to participate. Given the frequency with which players, parents, and coaches all reported scrimmage as a reward in the current study, it is a shift of potentially large impact.

Recommendations

Improving the Organisation of Youth Sport

A sports environment should be designed to foster desirable behaviour and meet players' needs. The less structure in an activity and the less performance evaluation, the more spontaneous fun is experienced and more socially accepted roles are learned by those involved (Devereux, 1971). Many scholars have voiced concerns that adult organised sport for children may not be particularly fun or enjoyable (e.g., Coakley, 1994; Devereux, 1971), yet Harris (1983) suggested that "even though many youngsters seem to have more fun engaging in less formal sport activities, many also have fun participating in organised, adult sport" (p. 391). Mandigo and Couture (1996) found participants in sport programs reported higher levels of fun than during structured physical education classes. This may imply some of the suggestions highlighted here have been implemented in some areas.

It has been suggested important elements for enhancing the fun in youth sports include: (a) a democratic environment (Baumgarten, 1984; Stover, 1988); (b) emphasis on personal development, personal involvement, and fun (Baumgarten, 1984; Coakley, 1994); (c) maximising children's involvement in the action, feelings of control over the game and ensuring there is a purpose and satisfaction for doing the activity for its own sake (Baumgarten, 1984; Coakley, 1994; Harris, 1984); (d)

children making their own games in free play have uncertain outcomes, so they may be fostered in organised sport, for example, fair teams, team rotation, or handicapping one team if they are winning convincingly (Coakley, 1994); (e) modification of rules to increase both action and scoring opportunities (Coakley, 1994; Wessinger, 1994); and (f) educating players and parents about the purposes of the sport program (Stover, 1988).

Children who participate in a physical activity program that provides them with opportunities to master fundamental skills and tactical awareness, will have fun and, at the same time, increase their chances for success in physical activities (Mitchell, Griffin, & Oslin, 1994; Turner & Martinek, 1995). These suggestions may lead to more game-like practices, which contain the elements of sport perceived as fun by players, parents, and coaches.

Implications for the Coach

Martens (1978) asserted that the quality of children's experiences in youth sport is related to the quality and competence of adults' leadership and understanding. Harris (1984) highlighted the role coaches can have on youth sport experiences. Research has provided strong empirical support for the hypothesised relation between adult behaviour and children's psychosocial growth in instructional settings (e.g., Horn, 1985; Smith, Smoll, & Curtis, 1979; Smith, Zane, Smoll, & Coppel, 1983). To date, coaches have been shown to influence children's attitudes (Harris, 1983), stress and enjoyment (Scanlan & Lewthwaite, 1984; 1986; 1988), participation objectives (Coakley, 1986), and self-esteem (Smith & Smoll, 1990; Smith, Smoll, & Curtis, 1979).

It is important to note for those not familiar with TGFU, that it is not the "ball roller" approach to instruction. Simply allowing children to play without any intervention or game modification is not TGFU (Chandler & Mitchell, 1990), though it may have been misinterpreted this way. "In TGFU the ball roller approach is not advocated. Timely teacher intervention in the game situation is critical" (Turner, 1996, p. 48). Our emphasis requires a lot of skill and pedagogical practice on the half of the instructor. Coaches who use scrimmages as a behavioural control may not be accessing the apparent benefits of a games-based approach. Indeed, children who constantly ask, "when are we going to play the game?" may be more satisfied with a TGFU approach. It offers opportunities for children to pursue task mastery in a game setting, which can also be important motivating factors for students (Mitchell & Chandler, 1992).

Some commentators do not address what they mean by skills. It may be more important to develop game-based skills more as they will help children develop the skills to meet the challenges of the game, and therefore be more likely to enhance enjoyable, or fun experiences. The TGFU approach may be useful to consider for the development of programs.

Structuring a Skill-Challenge Balance Using Games

Children modify games themselves to strike an appropriate balance between skill and challenge. They take actions such as moving goals closer together for fewer players and changing teams in the middle of game to make them more even. The importance of modifying games is to increase enjoyment (Carmichael, 1993), including restructuring games to increase the number of scoring opportunities (Wessinger, 1994).

The skill-challenge balance has been addressed by a number of authors as being important for fun. The implication seems to be that if skills can be improved, children can meet more challenges, and this adds to their experience of fun. Wessinger (1994) found that scoring was meaningful to children in sport. This leads us to consider just what authors mean by the skill-challenge balance. If a TGFU approach were implemented, children would be able to strike a skill-challenge balance in many of the tactical aspects of the game (i.e., they would have game skill, rather than technical skill). Having game skills means they will be more able to meet the challenge of the overall game, rather than of a series of (possibly infrequent) discrete actions.

We hypothesise that if individuals are taught in a way that emphasises the cognitive, tactical decision making elements of game play as the important skills (a TGFU approach), then they will have the game skills to meet the challenges of the game, rather than simply the individual skills to meet the challenges of discrete phases of the game.

Conclusion

Leaders may be able to enhance fun in youth sport by emphasising skill development and meeting more realistic challenges and not placing the emphasis on winning (Duda, 1987; Roberts, 1984). It is important to consider how sport coaches in youth settings can enhance subjective psychological experiences of their players.

A significant factor in children's fun in their youth sport experiences is the way practices are structured. Many common ways of teaching skills in practice settings appear to detract from the fun children experience in sport. If youth sport coaches are to facilitate children's fun, they may consider the options proposed by TGFU. When skills are learned in game-like situations, children will have fun while developing skills and learn in ways where the skills are useful in games. Adopting the process of TGFU will help to reduce cries of "when can we scrimmage?" and increase the fun in children's sport.

Several sources that have examined youth sport have identified a phenomenon that has been called the "Pizza Parlor Phenomenon" (Scanlan & Simons, 1992). This is the idea that enjoyment is what occurs at the pizza parlor, after the hard work and skill learning are over for the day, week, or season. But, Scanlan et al. (1993) argued youth and elite performers do not report this. What they do tell us regularly is that affiliation and special events are certainly fun, but so are the processes and accomplishments associated with achievement such as effort, learning, and mastery.

Traditionally, the view may still persist that the learning of skills is the "boring" and less enjoyable part of sport participation. The enhancement of such learning experiences should help enrich further experiences that already have been reported as possible sources of fun.

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