

ATHLETES FOR LIFE

Creating Athletes for Life

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Abstract

Youth sport programs offer fun and enjoyment, but also have countless physical, developmental, and psychological merits. While youth sport programs are popular and beneficial, a major problem is that their increasing “professionalization” systematically leaves kids behind (Gould, 2009). If we tout “sports” as an extracurricular activity that is only recognized through traditional competitive programs or as college athletics, we are only referring to the elite 1-2% of the student body who get to put on uniforms representing their school, while the overwhelming majority assume their new roles as spectators in the stands. The purpose of this review is to provide an overview of the consequences of existing sports, reconsidering what it means to be an athlete, and how Arkansas is in a great position to help youth athletes transition from traditional team sports to more lifetime-oriented sports.

Creating Athletes for Life

Youth and school-sponsored sports are a mainstay in American culture. Nearly 70% of children aged 6-12 play a team or individual sport, and over 7.9 million participate in high school sports (Aspen Institute, 2019; National Federation of State High School Associations, 2019). Club sports at the youth level are also popular, with more than 3 million youth playing soccer within a US Youth Soccer League (US Youth Soccer, 2020). This interest extends to Arkansas, with nearly 70,000 high school athletes in the state (National Federation of State High School Associations, 2019), and no shortage of support for collegiate athletics. Ask most Arkansas residents about “calling the Hogs” and they know you’re not referring to the ones out in the pasture.

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Youth sports programs offer fun and enjoyment, but also have countless physical, developmental, and psychological merits. Sports participation is associated with increased physical activity and healthy body weight (Taliaferro, Rienzo, & Donovan, 2010). Youth who participate in sports are more likely to have higher physical activity levels in adulthood (Baily, 2006; Dohle & Wansink, 2013). Youth sport participants experience increased academic success at multiple grade levels (Fox, et al., 2010; Trudeau & Shephard, 2008). Furthermore, youth who play sports demonstrate improved self-esteem, confidence, and social and life skills (Eime, et al., 2000; Fredricks & Eccles, 2006; Harrison & Narayan, 2003).

While youth sports programs are popular and beneficial, a major problem is that their increasing “professionalization” systematically leaves children behind (Gould, 2009). In addition to community and school sports, many young athletes play at the club level as well, with pay-to-play all-star teams, travel teams, and year-round competition becoming commonplace in many Arkansas households, even as the most common reason for quitting play is that it isn’t fun anymore (Aspen Institute, 2019, August). Youth sports are becoming increasingly cost-prohibitive, with the average family spending \$693 per child for participation in one sport for one year (Aspen Institute, 2019). Kids from households earning less than \$25,000 per year are only half as likely to play sports as those earning \$100,000 or more (Aspen Institute, 2019). With nearly 22% of Arkansas children living in poverty, this is a substantial loss of opportunity for participation, perhaps for those who need it most (Center for American Progress, 2022).

Another unfortunate outcome of our current youth sports programs is fewer participation opportunities as kids get older, with options occurring primarily at more elite and competitive levels (Kirk, 2005). A common reason for attrition from youth sports is that participants do not qualify for increasingly competitive levels of play, such as failing to make the varsity team in

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high school or the competitive community club team (Brown & Potrac, 2009). Decreased opportunities, and the related disappointment, are especially apparent in the discrepancy between the large percentage of high school athletes who expect that they will go on to play college and the tiny proportion who actually do. According to the NCAA, only 6% of high school athletes will ever get the chance to be on a college roster, even though 75% of high school first-year athletes say that they plan to play in college (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2017; Wiechman & Williams, 1997). So, what is our message for the kids who can't make the community club team or for the 94% of high school athletes who can't play at the next level? Are their days as athletes over? Unfortunately, if we tout "sports" as an extracurricular activity only recognized through traditional competitive programs or as college athletics, we are referring to the elite 1-2% of the student body who get to put on uniforms representing their school, while the overwhelming majority assume their new roles as spectators in the stands.

Consequences of exiting sports

This system of attrition from youth sports is a "crisis" that impacts health and well-being and holds lifelong health consequences (Aspen Institute, 2019). In Arkansas, less than half of adults meet the Centers for Disease Control's recommended level of physical activity, and 30% are inactive altogether (Sutphin, 2013). The proportion of high school students who are inactive increases from 15% of 9th graders to 25% of seniors, a trend which happens just as sports opportunities are decreasing for this population (Sutphin, 2013).

With such emphasis on sport participation among youth, they might be expected to incorporate the role of "athlete" into their identities. Athletic identity is the recognition of one's role as an athlete or self-identification as an athlete (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993). This identity can become of such high importance that it can be psychologically devastating in the

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case of discontinued participation (Pearson & Petitpas, 1990). Unfortunately, being de-selected from sports is a frequent occurrence in our society and commonly results in isolation, grief, loneliness, anxiety, depression, and loss of confidence (Melendez, 2006; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990). What kind of disservice are we doing to our youth by encouraging them to build identities as athletes, but then suddenly cutting them off from this important role when opportunities to play dry up?

A stark manifestation of the problems caused by sports program stoppages was illustrated during COVID-19. The COVID-19 pandemic prominently exposed the fallibility of our youth sports delivery systems that occurs when opportunities to play suddenly stop. Although lock-downs and restrictions were necessary to preserve health, the consequences of canceling practices, games, and seasons had a widespread adverse impact. We learned about many of the negative effects related to lack of sport participation such as isolation (Chen et al., 2020), exercise performance (Boonyarom & Inui, 2006), psychological stress, and problems with mental health (Schinke et al., 2020). Many parents had intense concerns regarding youth sports cancellations during COVID-19, citing these developmental consequences as being potentially more harmful than the situation that caused them (Minter, 2021). Why, then, do we allow youth to endure other unwanted stoppages from sports that occur through all-too-common means, such as graduations, failures to make the team, or inability to afford it?

Reconsidering what it means to be an athlete

As sports and recreation educators, we must modify the structure of a sports delivery system that leaves youth nowhere to use their identities as athletes once structured opportunities to play are gone. Reconsidering our traditional conceptualization of what “sports” and “athletes” are (or aren’t) is a key approach to helping youth maintain their athletic identities. Our current

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definitions of sports are primarily rooted in traditional team and individual sports in which athletes get to wear a uniform representing their school or club and compete against other similar teams. The problem with this narrow definition is that it leaves a void once that specific opportunity is over. If a high school senior's self-concept as an athlete is limited to wearing a sports uniform, are they no longer considered an athlete after graduation? Of course not! Former athletes don't have to "leave their athleticism behind with their school letter jackets" (Blumenthal, 2009, p. 56), nor would we want them to. Identification as an athlete, even in the absence of formal, traditional sport opportunities, is associated with health benefits, including better adjustment to college, more extensive social networks, and better adherence to exercise and other healthy behaviors into adulthood (Anderson, 2004; Helms & Moiseichik, 2018; Helms & Morris, 2020; Horton & Mack, 2000).

As we become adults, we develop identity with our various life roles, perhaps as a parent, a spouse, a member of a religious congregation, or an Arkansan. This identification can also include an athletic identity, even if we no longer play formal traditional sports. Knowing the distress of undergoing an unwanted exit from sport and the benefits of maintaining identification as an athlete, we should support and enable our kids (and ourselves) to continue viewing themselves as athletes. Redefining our notion of who athletes are would help our youth to continue proudly using that aspect of their identities.

Our responsibilities as sport and recreation educators include developing additional conceptualizations of sport to fortify a system with limitations due to inevitable disruptions, exclusions, or diminishing opportunities. Outdoor activities saw a participation surge during the COVID-19 pandemic, with running, cycling and hiking having the largest participation increases (Outdoor Industry, 2020). This shift illustrates the potential to facilitate similar re-directions of

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sports interests when traditional team sports become unavailable. New Olympic sports, including rock climbing, surfing, and karate, certainly legitimize and expand the concept of “sport” to include activities beyond the traditional (Diaz, 2022). The National Federation of State High School Associations also notes a recent expansion trend towards new, non-traditional sports as a much-needed way to include youth who may otherwise be left behind with no place to play (Niehoff, 2022). Here in Arkansas, we can incorporate our abundant natural resources, park systems, and developing active transportation infrastructure to recognize associated sports such as hiking, climbing, paddling, and cycling as activities that are integrated into active lifestyles.

Positive beginnings in Arkansas

Arkansas is situated in a great position to help young athletes transition from traditional team sports to lifetime-oriented sports through its prized natural amenities, burgeoning national recognition as a destination for state parks, trails, and cycling sports, as well as a recent push for sports and recreation facilities in several municipalities. In recent years, several cities, including Fayetteville, Benton, Conway, Bentonville, Batesville, Harrison, Mountain Home, Brookland, and Marion have been in various stages of the planning, construction, or opening processes of new sports and recreation facilities (J. Owens, personal communication, March 16, 2022). Active infrastructure at the municipal level not only reflects high citizen interest in sport, recreation, and physical activity, but is essential in providing opportunities for physical activity in an everyday context. Interest in lifetime-oriented sport infrastructure is also apparent in the expanding active greenway development for walking, running, and cycling in cities across Arkansas. In addition, Arkansas has achieved a national presence in triathlon and cycling sports, hosting events like the International Mountain Bicycling Association World Summit, Joe Martin Stage Race, UCI Cyclocross World Championships, and the USA Cycling Mountain Bike National

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Championships (All Sports Productions, 2022; Clift, Z. 2017; IMBA, 2016; UCI, 2022). These premiere events, and numerous other non-traditional sporting events such as rock-climbing competitions, adventure races, or paddling events further expand our ideas of sport and who athletes are beyond the ones that we see on an NCAA roster or favorite professional team.

Grassroots school-based triathlon and cycling programs such as NICA are a great start in helping to expand skill development and enjoyment in these types of activities that can help youth find athletic-oriented activities beyond traditional sports (Arkansas Interscholastic Cycling League, 2022).

Nike founder Bill Bowerman famously said that “if you have a body, you are an athlete.” Although this statement could be interpreted as contributing to the sale of athletic equipment, it is also a philosophy that sport, recreation, and physical education professionals must adopt to encourage and support lifetime sports participation. If students and citizens see themselves as athletes who walk, swim, hike, climb, cycle, paddle, run, do yoga, or martial arts, they are more likely to embody healthier lifestyles (Anderson, 2004). Instead of a limited formal definition, let’s consider “athletes” as movers and doers who participate in active lifestyles and encourage their bodies to be strong and healthy for active opportunities. Suppose the message to our youth is that athletes only play structured team sports while wearing uniforms, and that their days as athletes are over after graduation. In this case, their future involves idly observing as privileged others engage and participate. However, being a spectator should only be reserved for cheering on our favorite teams, such as the Hogs, Bears, and Red Wolves. Being lifelong athletes enables active, joyful participation in our own lives, rather than watching others have all the fun.

Broadening our definition of sport, providing more avenues for lifetime sport, and emphasizing

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fun and rewarding experiences through a wide variety of activities helps our kids embrace the athletic identity they need to become athletes for life. Let's get out there and play!

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