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# Youth Sport Specialization: Study of Athletic Directors

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# Youth Sport Specialization: Study of Athletic Directors

## **Abstract**

This study is focusing on the topic of youth sport participation, specifically the perceptions of high school athletic directors. The reasoning behind this study is to expand on the research that has already been done by studying subjects that have not been looked at before. Prior research has shown that there are many different effects of sport specialization on the youth athlete. Some may be positive and but also can be negative or hindering in nature. The results of this study refute and support previous findings as well as add new and credible information to the topic at hand. The participants of this study all were part of informational interviews in order to get the answers to the questions associated with the research. Each participant had their own answers in their own words but all had 4 common themes that they focused on during their interviews. Some of the results that came from this study will expose some of the points made in the previous research but will also support some of them. This study can be beneficial in two ways. The first being it adds new information to previous findings that expands the scope of knowledge of the subject and secondly, the information will help educate people on the topic so that they can make the right decisions when faced with a situation dealing with youth sport specialization.

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## Introduction

Popular belief in today's society is that America's youth athletes are focusing more on perfecting the art of one sport instead of becoming well rounded and participating in multiple. A common thought is that if a child specializes in one sport, the likelihood of that child competing at a higher level after adolescence is greater than if the child chooses not to specialize. In order to properly understand this assumption, one needs to know the definition of specialization and what categorizes a child as specialized. Specialization can be defined as intense, year round training in a sport while excluding participation in other sports (Jayanthi, Pinkham, Dugas, Patrick, & LaBella, 2012). What is happening in youth sport in regards to specialization is participation in many sports seems to be declining over the past couple of years. Even though sport specialization for young athletes has been said to be beneficial, another belief is that specialization may also lead to burnout, or one's withdrawal from a sport altogether. What is not known however is if specialization does have a direct relationship with the production of high quality athletes. This study has been conducted in order to collect the perceptions of people who oversee a large amount of young athletes but typically do not have contact with them on an everyday basis and to see if the results of the data collection can be accurately compared to the findings of the literature that has been reviewed.

This study can be deemed important to many parties including but not limited to coaches, parents, and prospective athletes. This study is important to these parties because the more relative information that is available regarding youth sport specialization decisions by each of these parties can be made easier. This study is expanding the knowledge of youth sport specialization because it collected information

from a party that was not mentioned or questioned in the literature that was previously reviewed.

The purpose of this study was to study the perceptions of people who are very close to young athletes within their profession. The question that has been answered by this study is, what are the perceptions of high school athletic directors regarding youth sport participation. This study has collected these perceptions in order to better understand the results related to the benefits and detriments of youth sport specialization.

### **Literature Review**

#### **What is youth sport specialization?**

Jayanthi, Pinkham, Dugas, Patrick, and LaBella (2012) stated that sport specialization is intense, year-round training in a single sport with the exclusion of other sports. What these authors examined was if specialization in sport really does lead to elite levels of performance or if it enhances the risk of injury and/or burnout by athletes in their early adolescence. Jayanthi and his colleagues studied different coaches, athletes, athletic directors and parents and asked them what they think has influenced the overall increase in youth sport specialization. The authors studied surveys from secondary resources as well as their own to obtain the information that was stated in the study. What they found was that coaches were the powerful influence for youth to specialize at an early age (Jayanthi, Pinkham, Dugas, Patrick, & LaBella, 2012). A survey of 153 high school athletic directors stated that coaches are the driving force behind youth specialization in one sport. This initially comes from the introduction of a sport by the parent, success in that sport then follows after a period of time, and then the coach influences the child to

pursue specialization within the sport (Jayanthi et al., 2012). In conclusion, this study found that, “some degree of sports specialization is necessary to develop elite-level skill development” (Jayanthi et al., 2012, p.251). Young athletes should delay sport specialization until late adolescence to minimize the risk of injury as well as maximizing potential (Jayanthi et al., 2012). This research provides a foundational understanding of sport specialization. The main takeaway from this study is the definition of what sport specialization is. Now that there is a definition of what youth sport specialization is, this study will focus on why specialization is happening.

Coakley (2013) gave an in depth look at the development of youth athletes and how sport specialization came about. The sample that Coakley used for his study was a wide variety of youth athletes as well as coaches and parents. Coakley also studied the different views in parenting and child development from observing and studying youth sports for over 40 years (Coakley, 2013). Coakley’s process of obtaining his information is he has done his own personal study of youth sports so his method of research is strictly by observation and records of his own account. What Coakley found within this research is he accounts the growth of specialization in youth sport can be credited to 2 major changes in today’s society. These changes are the privatization and commercialization of youth sport and the development of ideas about parenting (Coakley, 2010, p.16). Coakley then goes on to talk about other factors that have led to the increase in youth sport specialization. One factor he explained was the decrease in funding for parks and recreation, which makes it hard to maintain youth sport programs because of inadequate facilities or the lack of upkeep, which leads to an increase in youth travel teams (Coakley, 2010). Coakley also talked about how coaches who are teaching these young athletes on

elite youth teams are coaching for a job, which means the parents of these kids provide the coach with a source of income. Therefore, parents are influenced by coaches to specialize their children (Coakley, 2010). Coakley also credited the increase in youth sport specialization to how youth sport nowadays can shine a light on the parents. Since youth sports are so visible and high-profile in today's society, it can give the parents a sense of moral worth and achievement when they see that their children are competing and succeeding at such a high level and at such an early age. When a parent sees his or her child succeeding, that success directly shines on them because the child's success is in a way their success as well (Coakley, 2010). Lastly, Coakley explained how the visibility of young, elite athletes can influence parents on specializing their child. The example Coakley (2010) used was Shawn Johnson who is an American Olympian who competed in the Olympics as a teenager and how much visibility her parents got because of it. NBC stated that her parents were the ideal parents and how they put another mortgage on their house in order to support Shawn's athletic dreams is the ultimate example of dedication to their child (Coakley, 2010, pp.18). Even though Shawn Johnson won the gold medal in the Olympics for her individual athletic achievements, they were also a representation of her devoted parents. Visibility of this nature Coakley (2010) said is why parents feel the need to specialize their children. This information is important because it shows why specialization has increased so much in modern day. Coakley gives good insight and direct experience about the changes in today's society and how they influence youth sport specialization.

Gould (2010) did what Jay Coakley's article did in the preceding paragraph. He talked about why specialization happens. What Gould examined in his article, is why we

are seeing specialization at such a young age in today's society, some of the undesirable effects that it may cause, and why children are becoming more and more encouraged to specialize at such an early age. The sample that Gould studied for this article was different surveys taken by parents and coaches asking them about why they feel specialization is needed as well as what they think the benefits of it are. The findings of Gould's study start with the amount of time that is needed in order for an athlete to develop athletic expertise. Gould quoted Ericsson (1996), "...to develop athletic expertise, young people should engage in 10 years of deliberate practice" (2010, p.35). Ericsson also said that there have been found advantages of specialization at an early age in terms of producing high caliber athletes and Gould feels that this finding only influences parents and coaches to start specializing young athletes at an even younger age because of the believed effects it will have in the future. Gould also felt that modern day pop culture also has an effect on the perceptions of parents and coaches and why they feel young athletes need to specialize at such a young age. Gould (2010) used Tiger Woods and other premier athletes of the like and how their early sports specialization has been seen by the public for some time now and parents and coaches use these athletes as models for their own athletes and feel the need to specialize early. Another example used is the coverage of the Little League World Series and the national recognition that the participants receive. Other parents and coaches see these young athletes competing on national television at the tender age of 11 or 12 and feel that in order to get their child or team to that level is to specialize. Lastly, the increase in young athlete specialization can also be credited to the fear that emanates from parents who aren't subjecting their children to early specialization. Parents will often fear that their child may be falling

behind the other athletes because they are not specializing. This leads to an increase in specialization because those parents who weren't specializing their young athletes have now begun to subject their children to specialization because they do not want their child to fall behind (Gould, 2010). This information is relevant and important to this study because it gives some inside knowledge to why specialization is happening. It gives insight on why people feel it is necessary to subject young athletes to such intensive training. However, there is some negativity that comes along with this topic. Popular belief is that specialization at an early age can eventually lead to burnout, which is the child stops playing completely, and/or serious injury.

Mattson and Richards (2010) talked about the physical health of children when exposed to elite sport specialization at an early age. What the study examined was the physical effects that children are exposed to when they specialize at an early age. Same as the Gould (2010) article, this article stated that in order to reach athletic superiority, it takes 10 years of specialized training (Mattson & Richards, 2010). The sample that this research used was wrestlers of different skill levels and elite figure skaters and they used them to provide positive evidence of the benefits of early-specialized training. The process of gathering this information was records of injury rates in young athletes as well as the effects they have. The findings within this article could possibly come across as shocking to some people. Mattson and Richards (2010) found that most overuse injuries are sustained within the first two years of early specialization. A study that was conducted found that almost 45 percent of figure skaters have had some sort of overuse injury (Mattson & Richards, 2010). However, contrary to popular belief, Mattson and Richards (2010) found that young, elite athletes tend to suffer only minor injuries while

they are exposed to early sport specialization. Actually, young, elite athletes are provided more protection to overuse injuries because of the ability of the coaches and trainers on youth elite teams to identify, diagnose, and treat an injury and be able to understand the signs and early symptoms of overuse injuries (Mattson & Richards, 2010). This information is relevant because it gives a contradictory view to a popular belief. This is just one example of the different views that people can have on youth sport specialization. However, as with any research, contradictions can be found.

Russell and Limle (2013) talked more about the negative effects that early specialization in youth sport can have on a child who is exposed to it. Russell and Limle (2013) examined participants in their late teenage years and how their perceptions of sport and physical activity were related to their perceptions of their youth sport perception, including specialization. This research studied 153 participants, 71 that were male and 82 were female and had a median age of 19.8 (Russell & Limle, 2013). Also studied were different findings on the effects of early sport specialization as a basis to their own research. Russell and Limle (2013) gave their 153 participants a survey consisting of different demographic questions as well as questions about their youth sport experience, including if they specialized or not. Also asked was if they still participate in physical or sport activity today (Russell & Limle, 2013). The findings of this study are very contradictory to the findings of the preceding literature and how sport specialization can be beneficial. Russell and Limle (2013) found from their survey that 76 percent of the participants claimed to have specialized in one of the five major team sports (basketball, soccer, softball, football, or baseball) as youths. Those who specified that they specialized at an early age were found to be less likely to actively participate in the same

sport that they specialized in as a young adult. This finding supports the results of previous findings that youth sport specialization has detrimental effects on athletes through adolescence and young adulthood. Also indicated is that single sport specialization is more likely to inhibit physical activity, restrict proper skill development, and undermine the overall goal of youth sport in general (Russell & Limle, 2013). This information is important because it gives a contradictory view to the Mattson and Richards (2010) article on the effects of youth sport specialization. However, both are beneficial because it gives me precedent on both views of the matter and will be used to compare to my research and the perceptions I find.

### **Youth sport participation trends**

The Journal of Physical Education, Recreation, & Dance (2012) examined the trends of youth participation in sport and compares them from a survey in 2001 and 2011. This research studied 25,000 individual between the ages of 7 and 17 and the answers given through an electronically administered survey (“Sport Participation Trends”, 2012). What this research found was the different participation rates of numerous sports and activities and it was then compared to the same survey and its results from 2001. One finding was between the 2001 and 2011 results; there was a 57% decrease of the activities among all participants, 61% among children ages 7-11 and 77% among ages 12-17 (“Sport Participation Trends”, 2012). Also, in children ages 7-11, participation in team sports declined 37% in softball, 31% in baseball, 28.5% in soccer, and 1.8% in volleyball (“Sport Participation Trends”, 2012). Results were similar with children between the ages of 12 and 17 with decreasing participation in baseball, basketball,

football, softball, volleyball, and soccer. The results found that as participants got older, they started engaging in other individual sports and activities such as running, weightlifting, and outdoor sports to name a few (“Sport Participation Trends”, 2012). This information is relevant because it a clear-cut example of a trend in youth sport participation that is relatively recent. It helps in comparing other trends within youth sport.

Heathley, Himelein, and Srigley (2013) focused their research on one sport in particular. These authors investigated the reasons behind sport continuation and withdrawal in both female and male athletes playing highly competitive soccer. The sample of this research was 22 youth athletes whose mean age was 16 and who had been playing soccer since at least age 5 (Heathley, Himelein, & Srigley, 2013). The study also interviewed parents of participants and recorded the results of their interviews to go along with the results of the athletes. Players were asked questions about their reasons for leaving the sport, benefits, and challenges to name a few. What the authors found was of the 22 youth interviewed, half had discontinued playing and half were still participating. They also found that the players’ perceptions of time demands were a main factor for leaving the sport and females were more likely than males to leave the game because of a negative coaching experience (Heathley et al., 2013). The authors of this article discussed three strategies for improving retention among soccer players based on their findings. The literature stated that coaches who were more knowledgeable of female needs and development are needed, there needs to be a stronger importance placed on attentiveness to team dynamics, and a reevaluation of the time and pressure demands that are placed on the athletes (Heathley et al., 2013). These findings are important because it is another

trend but it is sport specific. By looking at specific sports, participation trends may not be the same for every sport, which can skew findings that deal with overall participation trends.

Dollman and Lewis (2010) studied if socioeconomic status is a predictor of sport participation among South Australian children. The study consisted of 1,737 children between the ages 10 and 15 and the answers they gave on a survey that consisted of 4 different constructs to base the answers on. The four constructs were 'is it worth it' (perceived outcomes), 'am I able' (perceived competency), 'reinforcing' (parental support), and 'enabling' (perceived barriers to entry). The findings were that participation is higher among the participants that are of a higher socioeconomic status and all predictors with the exception of 'am I able' were associated with positive participation among both males and females (Dollman & Lewis, 2010). This research is substantial because it deals with the barriers to entry. Among participants of a higher socioeconomic status there were fewer barriers for participation than the participants of a lower socioeconomic status (Dollman & Lewis, 2010). Most likely because the barriers to entry have to deal somewhat with overall cost and commitment. This research is important because it shows a factor that influences the participation trends.

Ekelund, Tomkinson, and Armstrong (2011) examined how much the youth are physically active. These authors studied different samples of youth from different pieces of literature as well as surveys from personal databases. Ekelund, Tomkinson, and Armstrong (2011) found that the generally accepted principle of physical activity for youth is 60 minutes of physical activity a day. 34.7% of youth between the ages of 15 and 18 met the 60 minute requirement in 2007 and that approximately 30 to 40% of youth are

actively participating 60 minutes or more a day today (Ekelund et al., 2011). This study is important because it justifies the idea that the youth of today's society are generally inactive and with 30-40% of them being physically active is a relatively low number.

Weiss (2013) focused on how people view and research youth motivation and participation in sport and physical activity has changed. The literature referenced a study done in 1989 and compared it to how people look at youth motivation in physical activity today. She studied different theories of research as well as older techniques and how they both perceived youth motivation in physical activity (Weiss, 2013). Weiss (2013) then talked about how nowadays we use different methods to measure youth motivation in physical activity and we look at motivation differently than we used to. This is important because it shows that we can more accurately judge perceptions and motivation of youth to be physically active. With these new methods, it is easier to find relate the actual perceptions of motivation within youth to the varying perceptions of why people think youth are physically active or why they are not.

A very popular and typically widely accepted trend within youth sport today is the idea that participation is slowly and steadily declining. According to Wallerson (2014), the changes in participation in some of the most popular sports in the United States and his findings can prove this notion right. Wallerson (2014) stated that combined participation among basketball, soccer, baseball, and football fell among boys and girls between the ages of 6 and 17 by about 4% between the years 2008 and 2012. When looking at the individual sports, participation in football in high schools was down 2.3% from the 2008-09 season and high school basketball was found to be down 1.8% during the same time period (Wallerson, 2014). High school baseball was found to have risen by

0.3% but participation in little league baseball was down 6.8% from 2008 to 2012 so it can relate to future decline in participation because fewer children are playing little league (Wallerson, 2014). These findings that Wallerson stated come from different reliable sources such as the National Federation of State High School Associations and the Physical Activity Council. This research is important because it directly relates to the idea that the overall participation in youth sports is steadily declining. These findings mentioned above reflect this idea and give factual evidence. Participation doesn't just decline in youth sport for no reason and these findings give support to this notion.

Another trend that is commonly talked about regarding the decline of youth sport is the idea that the youth population in the United States is generally a very inactive group of individuals because of the alternative activities they are offered. Spanberg (2013) addressed this topic of inactivity and childhood obesity directly. Spanberg (2013) focused on how different leagues such as the NBA and NFL have implemented grassroots movements such as Play 60 and NBA Fit in order to try and combat this disorder. Spanberg examined different statements of officials who are a part of these movements or deal with them directly. Spanberg (2013) stated that according to Michael Gray, who is an executive board member for the National Alliance for Youth Sports, said that over the past 30 years that childhood obesity has tripled to a staggering 18%. The goals of these movements such as Play 60 and NBA Fit have an overall goal of reversing childhood obesity (Spanberg, 2013). However, Greg Welk, an Iowa State University exercise and public health professor and NFL Play 60 advocate stated that obesity and weight loss is not the overall goal but correcting inactivity is the real goal (Spanberg, 2013). Spanberg (2013) also referred to the Turnkey Sports Poll that was taken in June of

2013, which stated that video games/social media/television is one of the main benefactors to why children are not participating in sports. This information is important because it goes into depth about another trend that is common within the youth sport industry. With childhood inactivity being a common trend today, this information thoroughly backs up this notion. This trend can also be seen in youth sport populations outside of the United States.

Allender, Cowburn, and Foster (2006) talked about the inactivity among youth and adults in the United Kingdom. The authors examined surveys done by different health and exercise associations and groups in the UK that looked at participation of both youth and adults. This researched showed that the population of both males and females in the UK are generally inactive. The UK government has actually set a target to try and get 70% of the population to be active for at least 30 minutes a day for five days a week by the year 2020 (Allender, Cowburn & Foster, 2006). This was put into place because of the shocking data that the United States faces with their inactivity problem because within 2 decades of when this article was published, it was expected that childhood obesity in the U.S. would be around 40% and that type 2 diabetes would effect around 300 million people (Allender et al., 2006). The importance of this research is it shows that inactivity among youth and adults may not be just a popular trend in the United States. It shows that the youth around the world may be inactive as a whole, not just relative to the U.S. Even though these last 2 articles have shown increase in physical activity and a decline in participation, there are still sources that feel participation may not be as tarnished as people may think.

Show (2009) talked about the rising participation numbers in this case basketball and lacrosse. The findings of this article came from over 40,000 surveys taken in January of 2009 about participation of children ages 6 and older. Show (2009) found that over 26 million kids age 6 and older played basketball in 2008, which topped as the preferred sport for children in terms of participation. Show (2009) also talked about the growing interest and participation in Lacrosse, especially among young girls where participation grew from 518,000 participants in 2000 to 1.1 million in 2008. This study shows that there are different views on the trends of youth sport participation. In some sports, such as lacrosse mentioned above, participation rates are increasing but this can easily be skewed because the information available does not take into effect the number of those participants that are just playing those sports. It is hard to find what kids are specializing in just by looking at participation rates and what kids could possibly be switching sports because of recent popularity, such as lacrosse. This leads to another important issue with trends in participation in youth sport relating to the fact that it is hard to measure the extent of youth sport and activity.

Kelly and Carchia (2013) focused on the different demographics that have a relationship with youth sport participation. Kelly and Carchia (2013) examined different data given to ESPN by Sports and Fitness Industry Association and different experts within the sports industry. The findings consisted of different tables, graphs, and infographics that show the data that was found. One of the most significant findings was the fact that youth sport participation numbers are hard to measure just how big youth sports is. The Sports and Fitness Industry Association measured kids from the age of 6 to 17 and labeled them as the “core” numbers when it comes to participation. This number

came in as 21.47 million kids participating in sports between the ages of 6 and 17 in the year 2000 and another study showed kids ages 8 to 17 in the year 2011 participating in sport totaled 39.82 million and both studies do not take into account the kids who start before age 6 (2013). Another finding from this study is the different opportunities that some children have as opposed to others. Kelly and Carchia (2013) talked about the different opportunities that children may have when it comes to sport at an early age. The authors talk about how some schools because of hard economic times have been reducing the number of opportunities available which leads to lower participation that the kids have no control over (2013). These are just a few of the findings from the article that have a relationship with lower participation numbers among youth. However, benefits of these findings were it helps people understand that youth sport can be hard to measure, which can ultimately skew the participation rates.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The first concept of this research was used in order to give a definition of what specialization is. Along with a definition, this concept also gave some generally accepted principles and guidelines that qualify youth as specialized in a certain sport. Concept 2 is important because it will be used to give me sets of data of different participation rates. This will help to understand the fluctuation in participation among youth participation and if sport specialization has a direct relationship with the findings. Lastly, concept 2 gave me answers to if sport specialization is actually happening and increasing at a steady rate as much as people believe it is. Along with these concepts came variables that were related to them. For my research, the 2 variables I used are youth sport specialization and

youth sport participation, which were the concepts but they are variables within themselves. In order to understand these variables there were few terms that needed to be defined. For concept 1, the first term was specialization. Specialization is when an athlete focuses on one specific sport and usually is playing at higher level than the rest of the athletes in their demographic or engaged in intense and specific training for that sport. The second term for concept 1 was elite as it relates to elite teams. Elite athletic teams are the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU), selective travel teams, and teams of the like. For concept 2, the first term that needed to be defined was burnout. Burnout is the effect that can happen to young athletes when they are over engaged in a sport, causing them to give up the sport. The second and last term to be defined for concept 2 was retention. Retention is the ability to keep athletes playing a sport that they have started.

When doing research, it is not uncommon to have moderating or intervening variables that could get in the way of understanding a certain variable. For the first variable, the biggest intervening variable was the differing views on what exactly specialization is. There are differing views on the principles of specialization in terms of how long an athlete is too be involved in order to be qualified as specializing. For concept 2, the first intervening variable was that specializing athletes are still a part of participation rates. The second intervening variable was fluctuating participation numbers. The third and last intervening variable for concept 2 was external factors that have an effect on participation, such as economic factors, opportunities and their relevance, and demographics of an area or people. In order for this study to be successful, the variables needed to relate to each other.

The way these variables related to each other was there is a common perception that there is a relationship between specializing at an early age and declining participation rates. With kids specializing, it knocks the numbers of other sports.

The preceding literature was a reference point for the rest of this study. The purpose of this study was to obtain the perceptions from people who deal with youth athletes directly but from a third party point of view. The study is relevant and important because the sample in this research has not been studied in the preceding literature. The results will be beneficial to different parties because the information from the athletic directors can influence important decision making when it comes to youth sport specialization.

## **Methods**

### **Research Question**

The existing literature has highlighted many different viewpoints including coaches, parents, and former players. The only population that the literature did not look at was athletic directors. The research question pertaining to this study was, “what are the perceptions of high school athletic directors on youth sport specialization?” and the goal was to get their insight on this topic. Their input was important because athletic directors typically see athletes through a span of time and see how some aspects of youth sport change or trends that have evolved in their time as an athletic director. They can give beneficial insight because of how involved they are with young athletes but can also give a view from a third party perspective.

## **Design**

The design of this study was a cross-sectional study through the process of interviews. Cross-sectional study is when data is collected through questionnaires and interviews and the data is only collected once. The reason this design is considered a cross-sectional design is because the information that was obtained was only collected once through interviews with the athletic directors.

## **Desired Sample**

The desired sample size for this study was 4-5 athletic directors that would be willing to sit through a 30 to 45 minute interview about youth sport specialization. The athletic directors that were chosen for this study were selected at random from a list of all Rochester, NY city high schools.

## **Procedure**

### **sampling.**

The sampling process used for this study falls under non-probability sampling and the key informant technique was used in accessing the sample. Athletic directors were chosen for this study because they have specific knowledge regarding youth sport specialization that was being sought after for this study. The way this sample was selected was all the athletic directors in the Rochester School District were obtained from a list that Compeer Rochester, a non-profit mental health company, had recently used in selecting their annual coach of the year award for area athletic directors and five of these athletic directors were selected at random to participate.

**data collection.**

The data that was obtained for this study was primary data because the study was conducted through interviews. The data is also qualitative in nature because the findings were based on perceptions, which is something that cannot be given a number value and cannot be quantitatively measured. Interviews were held to collect data and these interviews were held one on one with the participants that came from the selected sample. The types of answers that were received by the questions that were asked were open-ended in nature. The goal of this study was to simply obtain the perceptions of youth sport specialization by a group of individuals that have not been previously investigated.

All participants were asked to describe the structure of youth sport in their town. The idea behind this question was to just get a feel for the participation of youth in sport as well as the opportunities that are available in that specific town without pressuring the interviewee into fabricating answers about participation rates. Another common question revolved around more of a personal feeling for youth sport. The subjects were simply asked to give their own personal thoughts on youth sport. This open-ended question was asked to yield personal feelings and to get overall perceptions of how they view youth sport in today's society.

**analysis.**

This study used qualitative coding as the analysis of the data. Qualitative coding is the process of categorizing the found data into conceptual categories. The categories are either pre-determined, taken from the literature, or arise from the data. This study

used qualitative coding because the data that was obtained was an idea or a perception, which is very hard to quantify or measure. The categories of the coding were pre-determined, came from the literature, and some were created based on the answers to the interviews.

## **Results**

### **Sample Description**

For this study, the sample that was used was four high school athletic directors from schools within the greater Rochester, NY area. The four participants, for confidentiality reasons will from now on be referred as Athletic Director A, Athletic Director B, Athletic Director C, and Athletic Director D. All of these participants participated in informational interviews. All four of the participants were athletic directors in their respective school district as well as coaches at some point during their career. The sample was a good representation of the overall population because all 4 participants have been in their school districts for 5 years or more and have held other positions dealing with youth athletes before their current positions. The reason that there are only four participants is because I either received no answer or they declined to participate in the study.

### **Codes**

Within this study, there were 4 different codes that emerged from the findings. These codes were all mentioned throughout all 4 interviews and were the points on emphasis from all the participants. The first code that arose from the data collection was the idea of *outside pressure*. This can be considered a code because all 4 participants

talked about how youth athletes now are being pressured by outside sources. These were stated to be either the parents or the coaches of these different travel teams. The second code that came from the data collection was the *selling of these opportunities*. All 4 participants again mentioned this code as a main reason why some many youth athletes may be specializing at such a young age. The coaches of travel teams sell the idea of a scholarship to people as a way of getting kids to play for their team. The third code is *uneducated decisions*. This was another popular topic with the participants because each participant talked about to some extent how they have to educate parents on the decisions they make regarding their child's athletics. Lastly, the final code that was common in each interview was that *participation rates are not declining*. Each participant said this in their own words but they all touched on the fact that participation was not decreasing. Whether that was within their own respective school district or even at a national level, as one participant stated.

### **Themes**

From the data collection, four themes arose from the rest of the information, which are *Kid's aren't having say in their athletic involvement, specialization has become a status symbol for parents, opportunities are being sold by the coaches, and the impact of specialization on participation rates*. These four themes were the most common when it came to all the participants. Getting this final list of themes was very easy considering there were no iterations to find the final four themes. All four the most obvious themes of the study and were touched on by all the participants. The first theme, *kids aren't having a say*, was the most common because all four participants talked about how outside sources are making the decisions for the kids. Athletic Director C stated that,

“I don’t even think kids conceptually think about that stuff” when asked about if he thinks that kids are making the decision themselves to play these travel teams. Athletic Director B also said, “...no five year old says I want to go play lacrosse (at a high level)”, which is another justification that the decisions regarding a child’s early athletic career are dependent on the choices of the parents. This study showed that parents equate money to success when it comes to their child’s athletic success. They think by paying money to be on these teams is what is going to lead to a scholarship. It is almost to a point now where parents want full control over their child’s athletic career and they can do this by putting them on these teams and if one does not work out, then they can move on to the next one that they feel is better.

The next theme that came from the data collection is the idea of there being a *status issue for parents* when it comes to their kid’s athletic career. All of the participants, if just briefly, talked about how parents are trying to keep their kids ahead of the curve when it comes to athletics. Athletic Director A stated, “it’s like keeping up with the Jones’s... If you’re not involved in that sport by third, fourth, or fifth grade, the chances of you continuing it are very slim.” Athletic Director B also used the same analogy, stating that, “if we (parents) don’t keep up with the Jones’s, we don’t start doing lacrosse at 5 years old...it will be too late.” This shows that parents feel that they need to keep up with everyone else in order for their child to be successful in athletics. Athletic Director C also touched on the topic of the status for parents stating, “athletics in our country is a major, major cultural thing...as long as that continues to be that big of a thing, I think people are going to look for every opportunity or avenue possible for their son or daughter to excel and sports.” This idea has become a big trend today in youth

athletics. Parents are at the point where the success of their child is becoming more and more important to a point where they feel it necessary to keep up with the kids and families around them.

The third theme from the data collection was *the selling of opportunities outside of the school*. Travel teams are becoming more and more available for young athletes so each team needs to find ways to be competitive in order to get kids to play for their respective team. All four participants talked about how travel coaches sell the idea of being able to guarantee a scholarship for an athlete. This is how coaches are getting kids to participate. They are selling to the parents the idea that they can guarantee a spot at the next level. What most of the athletic directors in this study talked about were the expectations that these parents have and they just end up being disappointed at the end of the road. Athletic Director B said, “...there’s an expectation that there’s a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow... I don’t know how it got contorted this way but unfortunately the reward is not offered at the club level.” So what happens is parents just end up with disappointment at the end of what that coach promised them. Also, what these coaches sell is the idea of viewership from college coaches. This statement was actually said to be true from the participants. Athletic Director C stated that, “college coaches do not have the expendable income to travel to high schools to watch different athletes play.” This is a big reason why some parents feel it necessary to specialize their kids because they won’t get that college viewership but it still does not guarantee a scholarship.

The last theme that arose from the data collection was *specialization does not affect participation rates*. The popular belief is that participation rates are declining but all four declined that notion. Athletic Director D stated that, “being a small school we not

only need a lot of participation but we need multi sport athletes...we have a lot of 2-sport athletes.” This participant also talked about that even though his position is at a smaller school compared to other Rochester schools that his kids are very involved and some do specialize but participation is not hurt by it. Athletic Director B did a good job of giving a justification for this idea that participation is not hurt. This participant, a member of the National Interscholastic Athletic Administrators Association (NIAAA), stated that, factually participation rates are actually up throughout the country. Athletic Director B also made a good point that, “Well if Johnny is not playing football that is opening up a spot for somebody else who is either on that team for more playing time or have an opportunity.” This was a good justification that specialization is not hurting scholastic participation because it opens up opportunities for others to play.

In all, the data collection was successful in terms of collecting new information in regards to the topic of youth sport specialization as well as supported some of the previous findings. However, as stated earlier, the data collection also refuted some of the previous findings. All of this information collected can be beneficial to the topic in terms of educating stakeholders on the impacts and effects of youth sport specialization, as seen from a third, unbiased party.

### **Conclusion**

This study ultimately helped in finding more information on the topic of youth sport participation. As alluded to in the literature review, research has been done already on the topic but not from the view of an athletic director or a person that sees youth sport

from a different angle than that of a coach or a parent. The information collected from the four Rochester area athletic directors presented a good view on the subject matter and was able to be related back to the research that has already been done. The data collected from the study found four major themes among all of the participants. They were *kids weren't having a say in their athletic involvement, specialization has become a status symbol for parents, these opportunities are being sold by the coaches, and the impact of specialization on participation rates*. All four of these themes work back to the original question of what the perceptions of athletics directors on youth sport specialization because they either clear up or disprove some of the preconceived speculations of the matter that have been stated in the literature review.

### **Explanation**

In relation to the *kids aren't having a say in their athletic career* theme, the findings from the study of athletic directors can be related directly to the findings in the previous research. Coakley (2013) previously stated that there were two major reasons why the growth of youth sport specialization is so popular and they were the privatization and commercialization of youth sport and the development of ideas about parenting. The author then proceeded to talk about how the parents are making the decisions to specialize their kids. Scott Barker at Pittsford Central Schools and Pete Shambo at Penfield really stressed this point during the data collection process. Both talked about the role that parents have in making the decisions of their child's athletic career and this idea leads directly into the theme of there being a status involved in specializing the youth for the parents.

Coakley (2013) used the example of U.S. Olympian Shawn Johnson and Gould (2010) used Tiger Woods as precedent to why parents feel the need to specialize their child. Coakley (2013) stated that the success of a child's athletics gives the parents a sense of moral worth and achievement. Both Brian Donohue and Pete Shambo, who participated in the study, stated that this notion of moral worth and achievement is very much a real thing. Both men talked about how parents have lost touch with the idea that youth sport is for developmental reasons, and have replaced that with the notion that winning is the most important thing and have put too much emphasis on the idea of receiving an athletic scholarship. A good justification that both Donohue and Shambo used in the data collection that for parents, the idea of keeping up with the Jones's is a very important factor in choosing to specialize a child. This directly relates back to this idea that Gould (2010) and Coakley (2013) had of a child's athletic success gives a sense of moral worth to the parents and how it has become more of obtaining a social status for the parents rather than developing their son or daughter's skills as an athlete for future success.

When looking at the theme of these opportunities being sold by these travel team coaches, the data that was collected relates to the findings of Jayanthi, Pinkham, Dugas, Patrick, & LaBella (2012) as well as more information gathered from Coakley (2013). It was found that a powerful influencer on the choice to specialize for parents is the coaches of these travel teams (Jayanthi et. al., 2012). These coaches sell the idea that they have the power to get a child to the elite level of athletics, whether that be Division I or something of the like, all participants in this study negated that statement saying that the only person who holds the key is the college coach. Some participants even stated that

most coaches will go through the school to get information on a prospective player rather than talk to a travel team coach. So, it really does not make a difference if the child is going to specialize through these travel teams or play scholastically, because if the athlete is good enough coaches will find them. Coakley (2013) also talked about how some of these travel teams are full time positions for coaches and they use the selling of guaranteed athletic scholarships to earn an income. Multiple participants in the data collection touched on this point as well. Both Pete Shambo and Brian Donohue talked about the fact that these travel teams can be full time positions for coaches. In order for those coaches to make money, they have to get as many kids to play as possible so they use athletic scholarships as the selling point.

Lastly, the theme of the impact of specialization on participation was actually refuted by the data collection from the Rochester area athletic directors. Wallerson (2014) and Heathley, Himelein, and Srigley (2013) stated that participation, in certain sports, at the youth level are declining. The data collection of this study refutes these statements previously made. All four participants stated in some way shape or form that participation in youth athletics is not declining; in fact it is on the rise. Each participant stated that youth sport specialization opportunities do not hurt participation at the scholastic level and Pete Shambo at Penfield did a good job of explaining this. Besides statistical data that he had received showing participation is not declining, Shambo stated that if a child decides not to participate at the scholastic level, it opens up a spot for someone who possibly was cut or didn't want to play.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

A limitation to this study was not getting more people to participate. This study was taking place during the sectional time of year (NYSPHSAA playoffs) and it was hard to get in contact with some athletic directors.

A delimitation that was put into place for this study was containing the sample just to the Rochester area. A better idea of how the data collection relates to the previous research would have been more abundant with more participants but this size was much easier to control. Also, small schools and larger schools were represented in the study so even though the sample was small, it represented the different demographics of public high schools.

### **Recommendations**

Recommendations for future research would be to research each different finding separately from one another and bring them all together to formulate conclusions. This study focused on all of them at once so the participants were answering questions on multiple topics and maybe weren't able to elaborate on topics as well as they could have. Also, research using travel team coaches would be another recommendation. This sample has not been looked at yet and information could be collected from another side of the matter.

### **Summary**

In conclusion, the data collection, at times, agreed with the previous research but also refuted some of it as well. In terms of external forces influencing youth sport participation, they both seemed to agree with each other. However, when it came to participation, the two did not match up. A problem with this topic is there is still no definitive right or wrong answer. This topic could use much more research to find what the effect of youth sport specialization really is. People are still going to make the decisions that they feel are right and with continued research these decisions can be made easier with the right information.

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**Appendix A- Consent Letter**

Project Title: Youth Sport Specialization: A Study of High School Athletic Directors  
Researcher: Connor Morris E-mail: [cjm02106@sjfc.edu](mailto:cjm02106@sjfc.edu)  
Advisor: Katharine Burakowski, Ph.D. E-mail: [kburakowski@sjfc.edu](mailto:kburakowski@sjfc.edu)  
Phone: 585-385-7389

**Purpose and Description:** The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of youth specialization and the child athlete. As a participant, you are being asked to complete an informational interview that addresses youth sport in your town/school district. The interview for this study will occupy 30-45 minutes of your time.

The answers that you will provide throughout the interview will help in being able to get a clearer understanding of the relationship between youth athletes and specialization. This can lead to future changes in participation rates in youth sport depending on the findings of this study. The findings from this research could be beneficial to better understanding the role specialization has on youth sport and could be used to combat some of the issues that are prevalent today. The risk associated with participating in this interview is you are taking the chance of someone in your school district finding out you participated in the interview. Your responses to the interview questions will be used in a final paper regarding the findings of my study but, your name, if you so choose, can be kept confidential or altered to protect your identity and your contact information will not be disclosed.

Your participation in this study is greatly appreciated but is 100% voluntary. If you choose to participate, at any point throughout the study you can withdraw. If you choose to withdraw from the study, your answers will be disregarded and not included in the final presentation of the study. Having read this consent letter and after asking any questions about the process of the study, you will be asked to sign the bottom of the page. By signing on the line labeled participant you give me permission to use your feedback throughout the rest of the study. A copy of this consent letter can be given to you for future reference if you choose. Any questions, comments, or concerns, feel free to contact Katharine Burakowski Ph.D., Assistant Professor, St. John Fisher College Rochester, NY 14618 at [kburakowski@sjfc.edu](mailto:kburakowski@sjfc.edu) or 585-385-7389.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant name (Print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher signature

**Appendix B- Invitation to Participate (E-Mail)**

Hello,

My name is Connor Morris and I am a senior sport management major at St. John Fisher College. The reason you are receiving this e-mail is because I am seeking to conduct interviews with athletic directors in order to obtain information to complete my senior thesis, which deals with the topic of youth sport specialization.

As an athletic director you will be able to give me information on this topic that has not yet been looked at as a whole. A stance on the matter from someone in your position can help answer some questions that could be very valuable in regards to further studying youth sport.

I understand that you may be busy during the school year but my schedule is very flexible and would only need 30 minutes of your time to complete the interview. If you choose to participate just give me an idea in terms of your availability and I can find the best time to meet for the both of us.

Thank you and I look forward to hearing from you,  
Connor Morris

## Appendix C- Question Guide

### Questions

1. Before being hired for your current job, what other positions have you held and what were some of your responsibilities?  
 Why: The reason I am asking this question is it informally starts conversation. This gets the interviewee talking about themselves and what they have accomplished, which will hopefully get them comfortable for the rest of interview.  
 How: This will help me in a way where I can loosen up the interviewee and perhaps get some relevant information just from an introduction.
2. What other, if any, positions have you held that deal with youth sport? (i.e. a coach and will be asked if not answered already).  
 Why: This will tell me if this person has held other positions in a sport setting and if any of them have dealt with youth sport.  
 How: An answer to this question will show me to what extent the participant has dealt with youth athletes.
3. What are the opportunities available to youth athletes in your school district/town? This can include travel teams, training centers, etc.  
 Why: An answer to this question will show me what opportunities exist in the school district.  
 How: This will help me because it will aid in the analysis of participation because if the opportunities are limited, what may seem to be low participation might not be as bad considering the opportunities that may be available. Also, it will give me an idea of how many extracurricular opportunities exist as well.
4. Do you feel that youth athletes in your area are leaning more towards playing on these travel teams or playing for their school? Why?  
 Why: an answer to this will give me an idea if athletes in this specific area are playing just one sport and if they are playing for the school or not.  
 How: this will help my study by telling me if the athletes in the area are playing travel teams where they only focus on that sport
5. Do you feel these travel teams effect participation in school sport teams?  
 Why: An answer to this will tell me if the participant feels that participation in school sport is effected by the access of travel teams and opportunities of the like.  
 How: This will help my study because it will give me an idea if children are finding other avenues to occupy their time.
6. Explain to me your take on these travel team/specializing opportunities?  
 Why: This will hopefully initiate some conversation from the participant regarding if he or she thinks specialization is good or bad for a youth athlete.  
 How: This will help my study because it will give me viewpoints on the perceptions of the relationship between specializing and youth sport.
7. How do the opportunities for females differ from the opportunities for male athletes? Again, include extracurricular opportunities.  
 Why: an answer to this question will give me an idea of what participation is like when it comes to gender.

How: this will help my study because within my literature review, authors talked about the participation of boys and girls and the motives that they each have regarding participation. Getting an answer to this question will justify some of the information from the lit review.

8. Do you agree with the popular belief that youth sport participation has decreased as of late? If so, can you explain why you think this way?

Why: An answer to this question will tell me if the participant believes that participation is down.

How: this will help my research because it will tell me how the participant feels about the topic.

Why: This is a major part of my study because if participation can be considered to be down, then it will help me come closer to an answer on how specialization may effect youth sport.