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Evaluation of AAU Experiences

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Evaluation of AAU Experiences

Abstract

The purpose of this research was to gain a deeper understanding about what former Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) basketball players took away from their experience during participation. The reason this study was conducted was because AAU often requires a large time and financial commitment. There is a lot that goes into AAU between practices, tournaments, traveling, plus other expenses that show up throughout AAU. This research study is important to people who are thinking about joining the organization but also those who are interested in exploring if it is still beneficial to participate. It is known that a lot of talented players have developed from participating in AAU and that it is often thought of as a way to get recruited by college scouts.

The sampling method used was non-probability sampling and more specifically, the keyinformant technique and snowball sampling was used. Eight interviews were conducted to try and gain a deeper understanding from the participants to understand what they have taken away from their AAU experience. During the interviews, it was discovered that a lot of the participants did grow both as people and as athletes throughout their AAU career. There was a goal for most participants of potentially getting recruited and they thought that AAU was going to help them progress as a player and get noticed by recruiters. A lot of the takeaways from participants included non-basketball related outcomes as well. This includes things such as making new friends, networking, and learning a skill set of life lessons that they still carry with them to this day. The information that is known now is important because youth sport is something that a lot of people take advantage of and as more young athletes are getting into sport, they realize there are a lot of opportunities out there for them. AAU has proved itself to be a stepping stone for many athletes and if more people share their experiences, people may be more willing to invest the time and money into the organization.

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EVALUATION OF AAU EXPERIENCES

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Executive Summary

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The sampling method used was non-probability sampling and more specifically, the key-informant technique and snowball sampling was used. Eight interviews were conducted to try and gain a deeper understanding from the participants to understand what they have taken away from their AAU experience. During the interviews, it was discovered that a lot of the participants did grow both as people and as athletes throughout their AAU career. There was a goal for most participants of potentially getting recruited and they thought that AAU was going to help them progress as a player and get noticed by recruiters. A lot of the takeaways from participants included non-basketball related outcomes as well. This includes things such as making new friends, networking, and learning a skill set of life lessons that they still carry with them to this day. The information that is known now is important because youth sport is something that a lot of people take advantage of and as more young athletes are getting into sport, they realize there are a lot of opportunities out there for them. AAU has proved itself to be a stepping stone for

many athletes and if more people share their experiences, people may be more willing to invest the time and money into the organization.

Introduction

AAU basketball has become a popular way for young athletes to showcase their talents, play more basketball, experience new things, and to develop as an athlete and as a person (Janis, 2015; Willis, 2016 & Winters, 2016). The skills learned and the large number of benefits that youth sport has to offer is one of the many reasons as to why AAU basketball is played among so many athletes (Fraser-Thomas, Cote, and Deakin, 2005; Willis, 2016). There are a lot of young athletes who are playing a sport and specializing in just one sport just because they would like to hopefully continue their careers into college or possibly further (Brooks et. al., 2018). At the elite AAU level teams, a lot of the athletes spend a majority of their time focusing on just basketball. The culture of basketball has changed due to the Amateur Athletic Union and this is a reason as to why it is important to take note of what people have to say about the organization (Norlander, 2016).

A large number of professional athletes, coaches, and sport professionals have shared their opinions and disparaging thoughts about AAU basketball. Even though there have been a lot of people discussing the effects they are seeing in the sport, there may not be any action or sense of urgency to change the organization in any way (Cook, 2015). This is one of the reasons why it is important to look at college level students and athletes; to receive their feedback on whether things went the way they hoped to or not.

The objective of this research was to provide an explanation of what former AAU athletes thought that they got out of playing in the organization and to evaluate their experiences. There have been plenty of previous studies and articles written on AAU that discuss how people

feel about the organization along with their own personal opinions and experiences.

However, the research that has previously been done does not look into the athletes and their own view on what they took out of playing (Astramskas, 2016; Cook, 2015; Lee, 2017; Meredith, 2015; Norlander, 2016; Winters, 2016 & Willis, 2016). This research study provides an understanding of perceived notions of playing AAU and the results that the athletes received. It also focuses directly on the experiences that these athletes had during their AAU careers.

The research had a practical application because it provided both parents of young athletes and the athletes themselves an explanation and better understanding of AAU and what it provided. They will be able to use the information found in this research study to evaluate whether or not it is beneficial for them to participate in AAU basketball in order to improve and develop their life and basketball skills. This research provided examples of positives and negatives that are associated with youth sport participation and specialization while relating these concepts to AAU basketball.

The purpose of this research was to find out what AAU participants feel they learned from their experience while playing and to discover the reasons as to why they decided to play originally. The research question of this study was:

How do former AAU basketball players evaluate their experiences?

The aim of this research was to present a deeper understanding of what young athletes took away from participating in AAU basketball.

AAU basketball has been growing and has received a lot of attention from those in the sport industry. It is important to find the truth about how these athletes experiences may or may not have aligned with what other people were saying. Getting multiple perspectives on this topic is important to many people who are looking to associate with AAU basketball in any way.

Background

Youth Specialization in Sport

Sport specialization is defined as an athlete focusing on one sport throughout the whole year and not participating in other activities (Normand, Wolfe, & Peak, 2017). Young athletes are meant to learn and develop physically, psychologically, and socially through youth sport (Fraser-Thomas, Jean Cote, & Janice Deakin, 2005). The more a young athlete develops his skills, the better person and team player they are going to be which is essentially going to help their team and themselves in the long run (Willis, 2016). Life skills such as communication with others, problem solving, critical thinking, leadership, and time management are often learned through youth sport and are often beneficial to youth athletes.

The growth of our youth in today's society is essential and it can be said that youth sport helps with the type of development the youth need in order to be successful. There are a large number of life skills that can be learned through youth sport. Peers, coaches, parents, and other people that play a factor in the young athletes' life oftentimes are the ones who teach these skills to the athletes through youth sport (Fraser-Thomas, Jean Cote & Janice Deakin, 2005). A belief among specialized athletes is that if they only practice and focus on one sport then they will become better at that sport compared to the other athletes they are in competition with. (Brooks, et al., 2018). Athletes participate in youth sport for a number of different reasons. When Brooks, et al. (2018), conducted their study a lot of the reasons for participating were to increase their knowledge about the sport they want to play, make new friends and spend time with them, to be active, and to develop both life skills and skills for the sport in which they play. The most important piece of information that was found in this study was that many young athletes think that specializing in one sport is important in order to improve their overall execution and for

reaching a certain level of achievement. There was also a belief that if an athlete specializes in a sport then they are more likely to receive money to go to a college. These athletes think that if they only focus on one sport and become good at it, then they will be recruited and get some sort of scholarship to play that sport in college (Brooks, et al., 2018). This is rare but it happens for a few of these young athletes.

Development in all areas is a main reason as to why athletes participate in youth sport. In a study that was done by Erickson and Cote (2015), they found that the players who were the least talented got the most attention from the coaches which led to the players with the highest talent level to almost be forgotten about. Even though this may seem like the right thing for coaches to do, it often times has a negative effect on many of the athletes. At the youth sport level, it is important for every coach to give attention to every athlete or else they may become disengaged in the sport. A result of the study done by Erickson and Cote is that the coaches begin to treat and interact with the athletes in a personal way too. Many people participate in youth sport with the thought that they will be developing their life skills as well as their athletic skills. The coaches play a large role in this and if they are not educated in how to interact with these young athletes, then it shows that youth sport may not be creating the experiences that they originally thought (Fraser-Thomas, Cote, & Deakin, 2005).

There are both positives and negatives to participating in youth sport and Fraser-Thomas, Jean Cote, and Janice Deakin talk about these in depth in their 2005 article on youth sport. Many parents decide to put their kids into youth sport because of the physical results it provides. Youth sport allows for children to grow muscle, toleration for performing for a long duration, pliability, and overall health. Youth sport participation can help these young athletes later on in life when it comes to their health and preventing diseases or other health related problems. Along with the

positive side of physical development, there are negatives to the physicality of youth sport. A concern that many people have when an athlete decides to specialize is all of the effects that it may have on the young athletes' bodies (Brooks, et al., 2018; Fraser-Thomas, Cote & Deakin, 2005). Injuries occur very often when an athlete decides to specialize in a sport. Injury and overuse occur when an athlete is continually using the same muscles and motions over and over again with no change in their movements (Normand, Wolfe, & Peak, 2017). More leagues and sports can develop rules such as regulating pitch count that will help prevent overuse and injury (Normand, Wolfe, & Peak, 2017). One of the main suggestions is to take rest periods which allows athletes to give their bodies a break for a short period of time (Capranica & Millard-Stafford, 2011). Along with injury, there are many other physical and health concerns associated with specialization. Some athletes develop eating disorders and they can become exhausted with playing the one sport so much over time (Normand, Wolfe, & Peak, 2017). This is called burnout, as athletes cannot handle the pressure and constant work at a young age. (Fraser-Thomas, Cote, & Deakin, 2005). Educational tactics can be useful in preventing some of these negative effects that occur from overuse and burnout. Once coaches, parents, and even the athletes become informed on what can happen when athletes specialize and overuse their body, there could possibly be a decrease in injuries and a lower number of athletes that dropout/burnout (Capranica & Millard-Stafford, 2011).

Purpose of AAU

The Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) is an organization that sets out to help young athletes develop their skill sets and set them up for success in the future. Recently, AAU has begun to replace high school basketball as young athletes see more benefits to playing AAU (Winters, 2016). AAU gives opportunities to athletes who are looking to participate in the sport

to gain more experience and build up their skill set. College recruiters are often at these AAU tournaments and there is a belief that people play AAU basketball specifically to get recruited by colleges (Meredith, 2015). AAU often requires a lot of travel time and spending additional money because the tournaments and practices may not be close to where the athletes live. There are team and organizational fees like uniform costs, shoes, hotel costs, flights, food, and many more costs at tournaments that parents/guardians will be paying for whether it is realized or not. Many participants on teams may live far away from one another and that may lead to parents/guardians and the athletes having to travel long distances just for practices (Winters, 2016). Some may categorize this as a positive to playing in AAU because it allows for families to come together and spend time with one another, as well as getting to see and experience new things and locations (Meredith, 2015).

While there are many advantages to participating in AAU, there can be some perceived disadvantages as well. For example, if the athlete and their family cannot afford the fees and expenses associated with AAU, which include lodging, league fees, coaching fees, fuel and vehicle maintenance to practices, food, and many more additional expenses that are incurred when going to these tournaments. The organization almost eliminates those athletes' chances of participating in the organization just because they cannot afford the costs (Meredith, 2015; Willis, 2016). A lot of time is devoted to participating in AAU basketball because there may be practices throughout the week and then people are gone the whole weekend at these tournaments (Meredith, 2015). The detriments to the time that has to be committed is that many people have other things going on in their lives, and other children, and participating in a tournament every weekend may require families to examine cost-benefit analysis. Another downfall may be that not every team is going to give the participant the best teaching or experience because some

teams are there to just collect the athletes' money and some are there to actually develop the players (Cook, 2015 & Winters, 2016). Some teams may be teaching life skills and playing skills and some may be teaching just how to play in a game and not the other skills that they are meant to learn (Meredith, 2015).

One of the biggest complaints about AAU by many industry professionals and people who have seen the effects of AAU was the fact that there are too many games and not enough practices that are going to help these players become better at playing the game (Winters, 2016). Many of the athletes on the elite AAU teams are playing with people who do not necessarily live in the same area as them. This makes it hard for teams to practice before tournaments but this mainly only occurs on the high level elite AAU teams. Not being able to practice means the athletes are only able to get the game experience and the athletes are not building their skills by doing that (Winters, 2016). AAU basketball also has a tendency to be only focused on winning. While winning is great, many kids are looking to build their skills and become better players which is not only done by winning (Winters, 2016). The teams that are focused on just winning often times only have a few players that have the skills already developed whereas the rest of the players on the team are lacking in those skills but are not being developed because all of the focus is on those few athletes.

The Amateur Athletic Union has grown and developed as an organization in the recent years. It has created an opportunity for young athletes to play the sport they love and potentially even get noticed by college scouts to help further their basketball careers (Willis, 2016; Winters, 2016). There are tournaments that are specifically set up to have college scouts come out and watch the athletes play. This may not be the case for everyone because not every team gets this opportunity. The younger athletes do not get invited to these tournaments because they are not

developed enough. It is mainly the older and classified “elite” teams that get the chance to participate in these tournaments (Winters, 2016). There is a belief that only focusing on one sport known as specialization is going to eventually help the athlete. Many recruiters are often looking for athletes who participate in multiple sports and have a diverse skill set (Willis, 2016).

Current Conversations on AAU

People in the basketball industry from high school level to professional have their own thoughts on AAU basketball. There are a mix of good and bad emotions/feelings. Many people who have had an abundance of experience with the organization are typically the ones that are more concerned with AAU basketball and the state that it is in now. They also see the effects of the organization on the leagues and higher-level basketball.

Charles Barkley has been an active voice in stating his opinion on AAU and he thinks that it has been ruining basketball as we know it today (Meredith, 2015). Gregg Popovich who is the head coach of the San Antonio Spurs says that the organization has not been preparing and developing the athletes like they should be (Meredith, 2015). A current Division I head coach shares his thoughts on how AAU has been focusing on the individuals instead of the team as a whole which could lead to a lack of development in some skill set areas. There is a very rare chance that the young athlete who is playing in AAU is going to become the next superstar. Every person is made differently and even if an athlete does decide to specialize in just one sport, say basketball for example, it does not mean that they are going to be fantastic because some people just do not have that ability (Normand, Wolfe & Peak, 2017).

Kobe Bryant was previously in the media discussing his feelings on AAU basketball and his thoughts are talked about in an article by Bob Cook in 2015. In the article, it talks about how the organization is mainly in place to help those with money and talent succeed and those who

do not afford it to fall off the map. Kobe Bryant has said multiple times that there is no skill development being taught in this organization and on these teams. The popularity of basketball in the United States basketball is going to begin falling behind because of the thought that athletes from other countries are better players. These athletes that are playing in America and in AAU are not being taught the basic skills of basketball that are needed. Kobe also believes that this organization is just using these young athletes to make money but he also knows that changing the way the AAU works their organization is going to be a long process (Cook, 2015).

Bob Huggins who is the current men's head basketball coach at West Virginia has his own opinions on AAU basketball which was recently shared in a 2016 article by Matt Norlander. Bob Huggins agrees that the athletes today are far more capable and built a lot better than they were in the past. While he knows that these athletes have great potential he also notices how there can be and needs to be major improvement in the willingness to compete, the want to compete and the comprehension and understanding of the game of basketball. Huggins does not necessarily hate AAU basketball but he thinks that people are becoming less knowledgeable about the benefits of playing basketball at parks and outside courts where most basketball players used to begin playing. He thinks that players are getting noticed by recruiters in AAU but he also thinks that the meaning of the game is being lost through AAU. Today, athletes think that it is all about winning and not about winning while getting better as a player and a teammate. This is where the concern grows for Huggins. The attitudes of the players have changed and perhaps not for the better. The athletes are beginning to think that they know everything and that they are in charge and that is far from the case which makes Huggins worry (Norlander, 2016).

Kevin Garnett who is a former NBA player also has concerns and opinions on AAU basketball and what it is doing to the sport and the athletes (Lee, 2017). Garnett believes that

AAU has damaged the NBA and the main reason for this is because the players still need to be taught far too much. The athletes that are coming into the league have been treated like babies this whole time and now they actually need to work and learn. Garnett understands that AAU has its benefits but he believes that there needs to be more structure and more preparation done. Garnett's feelings on AAU struck some people as shocking and they came back to dispute his conclusions with their own thoughts. Mike Duncan stated that Garnett would be essentially nothing without AAU and that AAU is changing to become more aligned with what it is like in the NBA with sponsors and the media (Lee, 2017). Duncan also said that it gives the young athletes an opportunity to go places that otherwise they may not have without AAU. From what can be gathered from Duncan's statements, he is more focused on what these athletes are experiencing rather than what they are learning (Lee, 2017). Again, these two people are showing potential participants that there are some positives and negatives to participating in AAU.

Steve Kerr, head coach of the Golden State Warriors, is well known in the basketball community, and shares his own thoughts on the Amateur Athletic Union in an article written by David Astramskas in 2016. Steve Kerr will not disagree with anyone over the fact that the athletes who play basketball today are extremely talented. As stated previously, AAU is beginning to overpower high school basketball because many have the belief that it is going to benefit the athlete more. Kerr states how it is almost unfavorable to the athletes because people do not know the quality of coaches, competition, and teams that a player is going to get. Some are better than others and some care more than others about the true development of a player and person (Astramskas, 2016). Maurice Taylor states that this organization values games and individual play and that is not beneficial in the long run. Practice has been known to be very

beneficial and is supposed to help build players and develop them so that they are ready for the games. Teddy Dupay also had an input in the article on what AAU does not do for a young athlete. AAU is not going to help the athlete grow into a better player/person, get noticed, going to get the athlete money to go to a specific college, and there is not going to be guaranteed the best opponent in games (Astramskas, 2016). Overall, knowing the benefits and what AAU really is can be beneficial before deciding to play in the organization.

Summary

Youth sport can be beneficial to many young athletes but there are also some downsides. Sport specialization is also very popular among young athletes as there can be many benefits but also negatives in specializing. Many people have different thoughts on AAU basketball and what the organization is doing to help develop these young athletes so that they can excel in the future and give them a number of potential opportunities.

Method

Reflexivity Statement

I grew up playing sports and basketball was one of my favorites and so I continued to expand my knowledge and skills through AAU basketball. I recognized that my former experiences in playing AAU basketball might have created some bias in my research study. I have always been intrigued in the way people evaluate their athletic experiences because everyone is so different in what they go through. I have seen people use AAU as an avenue for different things like getting recruited, getting a scholarship, or simply just improving one's skills in life and basketball. The goal of this study was to understand people's experiences. Also, my experiences as a female sport management major contributed to the way in which I interpreted data.

The purpose of this research was to find out what athlete's experienced during AAU participation and their perception of the value of that experience. The research question of this study was:

How do former AAU basketball players evaluate their experiences?

The aim of this research was to present a deeper understanding of what athletes who participated in AAU think they learned and experienced from playing.

Desired Sample

A desired sample of college students and athletes who played AAU basketball participated in interviews. Willis (2016) stated that AAU provided a platform for young athletes to get noticed by college scouts and this is a reason why college students were chosen for this study. The desired participants were college students who attend a Rochester, New York area private college and who previously participated in at least one year of AAU. Participants who played college basketball and those who did not were both desired. Non-probability sampling was conducted and more specifically, the key-informant technique and snowball sampling was used. Key-informant technique includes individuals that are chosen based on specific knowledge they possess. Snowball sampling is where the key informant participants referred others that they may know to participate in this study.

Procedure

Interviews were conducted in order to understand the individual experiences. The interviews began with the participants filling out a demographic questionnaire which included age, gender, race/ethnicity, class year, number of years playing AAU, and the number of years that the participants played in college after AAU. The participants were then asked about their AAU experiences and the value that they saw in AAU. Questions such as, why did you decide to

play AAU and What are some of your strongest memories of AAU were asked to collect data on their experiences. Questions such as, was it worth it and What did you take away were then asked based on the value of AAU.

Analyses

Descriptive statistics were produced for the demographic variables that were asked at the beginning of the interviews. Open coding was used to identify all statements related to the research question, assign codes to all relevant data, and notes were made based on questions that arose or that need clarification. Axial coding then took place where statements were put into categories and further codes were developed as needed. Looking for patterns and explanations was the next step in the analyses of data and then selective coding. Themes were developed from the codes.

Results

For the research study, a total of eight interviews with the average length of time being 12 minutes and 12 seconds. The range of time was from 8 minutes and 41 seconds to 15 minutes and 41 seconds. The ages of participants were, three that were 18 years old, one that was 19 years old, two that were 20 years old and two that were 21 years old. The gender of participants were four male and four female. The race/ethnicity of participants were six who were white and two who were black or African American. In terms of class year, the sample consisted of four freshmen and four juniors. The number of years of participation in AAU within the sample ranged from 4-7 years. Two participants played 4 years of AAU, one participant played 5 years of AAU, two participants played 6 years of AAU and three participants played 7 years of AAU. The sample also asked about how many years they participated in collegiate basketball. The

number of years of participation in college ranged from 1-3 years. Four participants had played 1 year, two participants had played 2 years and two had played 3 years in college.

While analyzing interviews, codes were developed through background information and from the emerging data upon review. There was an extensive list of codes used because of some of the specific details that were given in the interviews. The list of the codes that were created are as follows; recruitment, exposure, scholarships, parents, support emotionally, driving, time, money, meeting new people, making new friends, building relationships with coaches, players, and parents, the love of the game, competition, improvement, life lessons/skills, patience, leadership, time management, the experience at tournaments, traveling, hotels, having fun, being on a team, winning, and a few more which will emerge through the themes that were developed from the codes.

There were a small number of interviews conducted. The findings below show the themes and areas of importance that emerged from the interviews that were conducted. The main themes that emerged from the data were (1) Support, (2) Takeaways, (3) Goals and Experiences and (4) Time Commitment.

Theme One: Support

Many of the participants mentioned throughout their interviews that there was a lot of support given to them while playing AAU basketball, whether it be through parents, coaches, or friends and teammates. Molly stated,

I guess it was mostly like my dad that was really behind me playing and he was like willing to take the time to travel and go everywhere and put the time in himself for me to play and traveling and playing a big part of it. So he was like willing to go places and he thought that it would be like a good bonding experience and like how often practice was

he said that like it would no problem to get me there or there wouldn't be any issues for me to play and then my mom was really behind it too. But like my dad was big on like traveling and making sure that I got to where I needed to be.

Her response shows the great lengths that many of the participants parents went through to allow their children to play AAU basketball and how they would drive them places, travel, and pay for all the expenses. Like her response, many other participants felt the same way when it came to the support that they had from the people around them. Sam mentioned,

Money was definitely a huge thing. My parents worked really hard to be able to provide for me and help me do whatever I want to do. I mean that was tough. It wasn't a huge issue but it was something that I consider when traveling and planning for other things. It was a lot of time. I mean I was gone most of the summer sometimes for weeks at a time like two weeks at a time, it's just a lot to plan around.

This participant felt the same way about the time commitment and the money that goes into playing AAU. The support that parents have to give in order for their son or daughter to be able to participate in the sport that they want to participate is shown in so many different ways. The general consensus that was shown by all the participants is that they would not have been able to participate in AAU basketball if it were not through their parents supporting them emotionally, through the time given, money, driving, and many more reasons.

Theme Two: Takeaways

When the participants were asked about what they have taken away from their AAU experience, a majority of their responses included the life skills that they took away and also the basketball knowledge and skills that were learned and so that is why this theme is broken into those two sub themes. Erin stated,

Skill wise I learned how to work out and work with my body I guess you would say like I learned how to use my body properly when doing different exercises and tasks like within basketball. In life skills, I learned how to listen. I learned how to listen to people even if I know they're wrong. If their tone is horrible I know how to just take it and just go with it and not lash back or anything like it taught me patience as well as loyalty towards the coaches and everyone.

Erin touched upon both themes and took away not only basketball skills and knowledge but also important life lessons that she may not have learned anywhere else. This was very common among the participants and oftentimes found themselves valuing the life lessons over the basketball things.

Lebron Jordan dove a little bit further into some of the specific basketball skills and strategies that he learned over his AAU career. "The leadership skills that I mentioned earlier. Like moves in the post and just techniques that pertained to my, you know, type of playing style that my coach taught me I still use so really just kind of strategy". He also stated later in the interview a little bit more about the basketball skill he learned. "It definitely helped me, like recognize my role and to be effective with the ball... AAU taught me that like when you did just make the most of it and if you had the shot, definitely execute".

The participants placed a lot of emphasis just on the fact of how important knowing the role you have on your team is, learning different styles of play and strategies and adjusting to them, and how being effective is so important when playing AAU basketball and that it was one of their main takeaways from AAU. Andrew also mentioned in his interview the style and strategy and adjusting when on different teams. "In AAU, you feel more free to do what you

want to do... high school you kind of have to like abide by the coaches rules and fit into his system". Andrew also shares a little bit about the life lessons.

A lot of stuff like life lessons I learned it's like things are not always going to go your way like it might not always be fair but it's how you react to it like you can't. There's just certain things you can't control and so I think AAU taught me that.

These same thoughts were very similar in terms of discussing the adjusting the style of play and the life lessons. After analyzing the interviews, it was clear in the answers that were given the participants felt that they matured and that could be a main contributing reason as to why a lot of them when asked if they would do it again and if it was worth it they respond with yes and in a very positive way.

Theme Three: Goals and Experiences

All participants were asked about what their goals were going into AAU. Many of them had the similar goals of getting better, wanting to have fun, getting to travel, and getting recruited or wanting a scholarship. These goals lead them to having the experiences of traveling to new places, trying new things, meeting new people, and then also going through the recruitment process and finding the right college was an entirely different experience for many of them. Leah stated,

Well my goal was to get better... But initially just playing was for fun because obviously playing at a level above you is more fun and it's more challenging and you get to do more with different people and new experiences and stuff like that but my motivation was more to get better... I knew that if I wasn't prepared enough for the next level that came after AAU then I wasn't going to be recruited.

Many participants had the same feeling towards AAU and how if they did not participate then they may not have had the opportunity to get recruited and be prepared. They also shared the initial goals when they started to play AAU which was to get better and have fun. Erin shared a similar response when asked about her goals and experiences. “I didn’t really have a goal starting out. I just did it for fun but once I got more into high school I was like oh like I kind of want to go play. So I am like my goal is to get recruited by the good schools and kind of like bigger schools”.

Again, this shows that many of these participants initially went in to AAU just for fun and to get better but once they realized what AAU could potentially do for them they started the hope of getting noticed by college coaches and getting recruited. John mentioned some of the experiences in his interview and a lot of the participants mentioned similar things to him.

I mean honestly the biggest thing is my experiences. I mean whether we won or lost in a tournament. So just having fun with your friends and like I said traveling and staying in hotels and all the experiences you had other than playing basketball I think is the biggest thing.

A lot of participants shared similar experiences and the traveling and staying in hotels and just being around new people and spending weekends with them was a lot of the things that the participants remembered the most.

Theme Four: Time Commitment

Time commitment was a common theme when conducting interviews. A lot of the participants mentioned the time or scheduling that they had to do on a daily basis during AAU and even if they did not say it directly, the indirect notions of time management and scheduling were clear. AAU often includes a lot of time commitment especially on the weekends and if you

add that on top of other life obligations it tends to add up for many people. Many participants thought of this time commitment as normal but there was one participant who wishes they could go back and not spend as much time on AAU because of the other things they missed out on. Lebron Jordan talks about how time affected his participation. “The time commitment was normal for my family. We were surrounded by sports all year long”. Andrew also shared a similar thought about the time commitment.

Well when I was younger it wasn't too much of a time commitment to do it because I didn't really have much going on but like as you get older it just starts during the summer and it takes up most of your summer. You got to work around it.

Andrew shared the statement of working around it and throughout the interviews this was a common theme. Many thought that it was a big commitment but it is normal to them and once you started getting busier it was more of scheduling and planning things so that AAU can still be a priority. Ryan was the outlier on this theme where he wished he could have spent more time doing other life obligations instead of focusing on AAU all the time.

I definitely would have skipped some tournaments towards the end to go to like family stuff and graduation parties... Honestly, I would just say less time commitment to it because it was every weekend it was practice half an hour away for two hours at a time, two times a week.

Ryan was an outlier in this situation but it is still clear that priorities had to be made and scheduling still played a big role during his participation in AAU basketball. Even though every participant's answers varied slightly, it was still clear to see that a lot of planning and time commitment goes into AAU basketball but that is the nature of it and it is meant to be a lot so it allows players to succeed to their fullest.

Discussion

Demographics

The sample consisted of eight participants, the race/ethnicity of the participants consisted of 4 White and 4 African American. The answers did not vary based on race/ethnicity but there were 4 females and 4 males in which the answers from the females did tend to lean more towards the teamwork side and working together when asked about their AAU experiences. The answers varied based on how many years they participated in AAU. The participants who participated in more years of AAU compared to others, often had more experiences with coaches and players because they have been on more teams. There were 4 freshmen and 4 juniors who participated in the study and the answers to the questions did not vary based on that class year difference.

Sample and Population

The results from this study suggested that former AAU basketball players found that their AAU experiences were overall positive, had a good impact on them, and that they would do it all over again if they had the opportunity to. AAU was said to be a major time and financial commitment but they found ways to make it work and to have the opportunity to participate in the organization. Given that this study was a qualitative analysis, it should not be generalized to the entire population of former AAU basketball participants, although this research could be transferable to those at other college institutions. It is impossible for eight people to represent an entire population of former AAU basketball participants and it shows people at a private institution in Rochester, New York.

Answer to Research Question

The questions asked throughout the interviews were aimed towards developing a deeper understanding of what former AAU basketball athletes thought and took away from their AAU

experience. The responses to most of the interview questions addressed the want of getting better at basketball and the potential of playing at the next level. Exposure was a key word that was used and this shows that AAU has shown itself as a platform for preparing athletes for the next level. All of the participants in the research study have either previously played at the collegiate level or they are currently playing at the collegiate level. This question about the number of years of collegiate participation was asked in the demographic survey that was distributed before the interview. It was important to the study to know how many years the participants played AAU but also how many years in college they played. This information helped piece together how much time and money was devoted to the organization and the sport in general.

The tournaments and traveling aspect of AAU really stood out as well during the interviews as it was clear this is where a lot of the bonding and learning was developed. Time commitment was described as “normal” by many participants as many of them grew up playing sports and knew that scheduling was a big part of sport participation. The participants recognized how big of a role their parents played in their AAU career. Parents played a role in support, financially, the time commitment, and just being able to provide the opportunity for them to play. Meeting new people was something that each of the participants mentioned because they have made friends and built relationships with people that will last a lifetime. It shows how close people can get to one another when they all have a similar goal and are playing a sport in which they all love. It was clear during the interviews that there was not a lot of negativity that was involved in their experiences and even in conflicting situations they all somehow turned it into a learning experience. AAU helped the participants grow into the people they are today and has brought a lot of important people into their lives that will forever have an impact.

Explanation

As stated before, all of the participants in this study has been involved in sports from a young age. There were a lot of points during the interviews that corresponded with prior research on AAU but also contradicted previous findings. One thing that was consistently brought up while conducting interviews was the parental involvement. A lot of the experiences with parents was positive and they supported their children in their AAU involvement. Many people say that too much parent involvement and pressure can lead to the child getting burned out and just hating the sport (Fraser-Thomas, Cote, & Deakin, 2005). The participants stated that their parents had a lot of involvement but none of them mentioned them being too overbearing or pressuring them too much. Molly mentioned in her interview how she witnessed some of her teammates parents become too involved and sometimes it brought her teammates down but that was the only negative comment that was made about parents during the interviews.

It was also found throughout the interviews that many of the participants played more than one sport when they were younger. This contradicted some of the prior research about specialization. They all found a way to prioritize basketball but most of the participants were still involved in other physical activities. In one of the articles, it talked about how youth sport participation can help with time management, physical strength, balancing life, and improving on their athletic skills and learning new life skills (Normand, Wolfe & Peak, 2017). Every participant mentioned how they have learned life skills that they will never forget. They learned skills such as, leadership, teamwork, knowing how to communicate with people, preparation, time management, how things are not always going to go in your favor, listening, and patience to name a few. The participants also mentioned all of the basketball skills that they learned during their AAU careers. Some basketball skills include knowing how to adjust to different styles and techniques, reading defense, playing defense, knowing how to play at a faster pace, and just general

basic techniques. One criticism that was found in prior research is that once these athletes get back to high school basketball or go onto the next level their defense needs to be taught again or their fundamentals need to be taught again (Winters, 2016). Based on the interviews, this is not shown to be true. All participants mentioned how their goal was to get better and when asked if they fulfilled those goals no one mentioned that they did not think that they got better. The participants made it a point to show that if it were not for AAU basketball then they probably would not have been able to play at the collegiate level or get noticed by college coaches.

Recruiting was also a main point of emphasis that was made throughout the interviews. Most of the participants went into AAU wanting to improve their basketball skills but as time went on their goals changed to wanting to get recruited and to get exposure to college coaches. In prior research, it was stated that showcase tournaments were not actually showcase tournaments at all. What this means is that there is a preconceived notion that all tournaments are going to have college coaches at them (Winters, 2016). The participants had an understanding that there was not always going to be a recruiter there but they did mention that their coaches made an effort to put their teams in tournaments where they knew there was going to be great opportunities for them to be seen by recruiters.

There have also been criticisms about AAU that stated how there are too many games and not enough practices and that the athletes are not truly building a relationship with one another and that it is not helping them develop them into the players they want to be (Astramskas, 2016 & Winters, 2016). Every participant mentioned that their teams would practice at least once or twice a week and for hours at a time. This contradicts the preconceived notion that there are too many games and not enough practices. The participants felt that the tournaments brought them a great deal of knowledge about the sport and that the games were important because you were exposed

quickly on what you had to improve on. Each participant had played AAU for a few years and not one of them mentioned that they wish they would have had more practices instead. Participants also did not place a large emphasis on winning as prior research had stated, AAU teaches kids to want to win and not to actually learn (Winters, 2016). This was not shown through the interviews. It was clear that the participants enjoyed winning but they knew that it was not the most important thing to them. Most of them mentioned the fact that it was a “TEAM” game and that winning was not always the most important thing. Winning was fun to them and was brought up in discussion about their memories but never what they solely focused on. Finally, prior research showed how overall AAU basketball provides a positive experience and positive outcomes is shown to be true through the interviews that were conducted (Lee, 2017).

Delimitations

In this research study, the decision was made that interviews would be the best way to collect the data and would provide the best results based on the research question. There was a set of eleven questions that were consistent throughout all eight interviews that were conducted. The demographic questionnaire that was given to participants before the interview was also a controllable factor in the research study and remained consistent through all eight interviews. Instead of doing interviews for this research study it may have been useful for surveys to have been distributed due to the fact that the results may have potentially been more valuable. It could have given better results that would have been more specific to the research question and the questions in the survey could have been based off of the background information. Having more experience in conducting interviews could also have been extremely valuable and could have helped frame better questions during the interview that helped in answering the research question.

Limitations

During interviews, it is impossible to control the answers that participants will have to the prepared questions that are asked. It was also hard to keep the same follow up questions the same for each participant due to the fact that not every participant said the same thing to the questions that were asked and therefore, follow up questions were different and the interviews may have gone in different directions than intended. Another limitation with this research study was, the time constraints. If there was a longer time period in which interviews were allowed to be conducted, more interviews could have been conducted and the sample would have represented the population better. Limitations also include the access to former AAU basketball participants in the sense that there was not a list of former AAU athletes and could not set up interviews with a larger sample.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to understand how former AAU athletes evaluate their experience during their participation. The study showed that there are a lot of positive experiences that were taken away and that if these athletes could go back again and do it all over, they would. Building relationships, traveling and getting to witness new things, and just having fun were the general takeaways and that says a lot about what the organization provides people. These are moments that many of these former athletes will never forget. The current conversations about AAU, youth sport in general, and specialization in sport all played a role for these athletes. Many talked about how they prioritized basketball, grew up playing sports, and the things that were being talked about by people in the industry did show in the interviews but were not as negative. It is important that we continue to dive into this large organization and truly understand what their purpose is. These athletes that were interviewed show how beneficial it can be to join AAU but in the future, it would be valuable to get a larger sample size that would represent the population

more. Potentially interviewing athletes at all division levels and interviewing people from all over the country can provide great information. Each person has a different experience based on where they are from and the team they were on. Finding a more diverse sample could provide future athletes the information they need before deciding if they want to play in this organization or not. This information could also be beneficial to AAU as an organization as they can make improvements or make adjustments based on real life feedback. Overall, this study provided a great base for future research and showed that this information can be beneficial to a large number of people.

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