

Motivational Obstacles and Dropout among Female Youth Athletes

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Abstract

The dropout from competitive sport among young female athletes is a typical phenomenon especially during childhood and adolescents. This research examined the obstacles young females face while participating in team and individual sport disciplines. Participants included young female athletes (n = 889, age 8 - 17 years) from 10 different individual and team sport disciplines. The young athletes' reasons for dropout from sports were measured by a valid and reliable questionnaire (Gould et al., 1985). Results of factor analysis for the obstacles that the young female athletes face while participating in competitive sport revealed four different factors: CF (coach factor), EF (external factor), NTF (no time factor), and NSF (no success factor). A three-way ANOVA with repeated measures (4 factors × 3 age groups × individual/team sport) revealed significant main effect for factors, significant main effect for individual/team sport, and significant interaction between factors, age groups, and individual/team sport. Post-hoc test with Bonferroni adjustments indicated that in individual sport among young age, NSF was higher than all the other obstacles, while in the middle and older age groups, NSF and NTF were higher than CF and EF. This means that in older ages, time factor is an obstacle together with no success factor. In team sports no significant obstacles were found among the young group. However, in the middle group NSF was the largest obstacle of the four. This means that no success is the most dominant obstacle compared to the other three. For the adult group NSF and NTF were higher than CF and EF. Applied recommendations based on the results of the study are presented.

Keywords

Dropout, Female Athletes, Motivational Obstacles

1. Introduction

Dropout is a typical phenomenon among athletes in childhood and adolescence (Crane & Temple, 2015; Fraser-Thomas et al., 2008; Perry, 2013; Wetton et al., 2013; Zarrett et al., 2020). Dropout is considered a loss of talent and economically, a loss of investment. This is especially critical in small countries with a relatively low number of competitive athletes. Therefore, research studies and applied sport psychology alike are concerned with the reasons for dropping out, its prevention and athletes' coping efforts (Alfermann, 2000; Fraser-Thomas et al., 2008; Sabo, 2013).

Studies on youth participation motivation in competitive sport are usually based on three theoretical models: Competence motivation theory (Harter, 1981), achievement goal orientation theory (Nicholls, 1984) and self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985). In line with these theories, the dropout phenomenon among young athletes is explained in the literature by various factors. Adolescent athletes who dropped out of sports showed lower perceptions of abilities than adolescents with higher perceptions of abilities (Boiche & Sarrazin, 2009; Crane & Temple, 2015). Lack of enjoyment may also result from an overly competitive environment which may deter some teens and undermine their motivation to participate in sports (Zarrett et al., 2020). Indeed, a study by Choi and colleagues (2014) showed that competition in sports can be perceived as an obstacle as it produces anxiety and a sense of fear of failure and therefore reduces self-confidence and enjoyment of sports.

Another factor cited to explain the dropout phenomenon was linked to the influences of significant others on the athletes' experience. For example, dissatisfaction with the coach, family pressure, and responses from society are to some extent significant factors in the decision to cease participating in sports (Abadi & Gill, 2020; Wetton et al., 2013). Injuries, especially serious ones (e.g., that require surgery) have also been found to lead to dropout from sports. Injury itself is emotional for athletes because it involves physical challenge, rehabilitation, and the possibility of impaired performance afterwards. However, in the study of Koukouris (2005), young gymnasts reported losing interest in sports after an injury because of the indifferent attitude displayed toward them by coaches and managers when they were injured. Lastly, another factor may be perception of the great difficulty of combining school and education with the high demands of sport training and competition (Wylleman et al., 2004).

These dropout factors were found among adolescent boys and girls. However, a number of factors found in the literature related specifically to girls. One of them is the girls' encounter with gender stereotypes, according to which participation in sports is culturally considered masculine. According to Staurowsky (2016) this gender stereotype creates an internal conflict in female athletes: that one can be an athlete or a woman but not both together. This discord affects girls' continued participation in competitive sports, and the social message that sport is a masculine activity causes girls to refrain from participating in sports in

general (Daniels, 2005; Green, 2010). However, in some situations girls challenge these stereotypes and satisfy their desire to engage in sports.

Subsequently, girls experience stronger feelings of self-awareness about their appearance and self-image than do boys (Slater & Tiggemann, 2010). Reactions from their social environment and their parents increase self-awareness of appearance while performing and may lead to negative feelings toward their body, appearance, and add further concern about performance which may later lead to dropout (Zarrett et al., 2020). Finally, academic requirements were found to be a barrier to girls' participation in sports. This aspect becomes increasingly important as girls get older and is manifested in academic pressures, lack of time and lack of energy that detracts from the ability to invest in sports activities (Zarrett et al., 2020).

Based on the above, it was hypothesized that differences exist in the obstacles that female athletes face along the timeline of sport participation and across individual and team sports. Knowledge of these obstacles is important for designing effective intervention approaches to decrease the dropout rate of girls from competitive sports. This paper presents data pertaining to the dropout rate of girls from competitive sports. Data regarding their motivational patterns for commencing and continuing in competitive sports were presented in a separate paper (Orbach et al., 2021).

2. Methods

This study is part of a larger project whose main objective was to understand what motivates sport activity initially, what maintains motivation for continued adherence, and finally what obstacles cause young female athletes to drop out of competitive sports. The project included three parts. The first two parts were already published elsewhere (Orbach et al., 2021). Data pertaining to the third part, focusing on the obstacles that athletes face, are presented below.

2.1. Participants

Participants included young female athletes ($n = 889$, age 8 - 17 years) from 10 different individual and team sport disciplines. The individual sports were swimming ($n = 98$), track and field ($n = 95$), judo ($n = 97$), gymnastics ($n = 116$), sailing ($n = 49$), and windsurfing ($n = 12$). The team sports were football ($n = 113$), handball ($n = 109$), basketball ($n = 91$) and volleyball ($n = 109$). All sports were divided into three age groups to examine the athletes' development according to chronological age. The age groups were: 8 - 10 years (young), 11 - 13 years (middle) and 14 - 17 years (adult). Because participation in a handball team begins later than in the other sports, participants from that sport were divided into two age groups: 8 - 13 (middle) and 14 - 17 (adult).

2.2. Instrument

The modified Gould, Feltz, and Weiss (1985) questionnaire for examining young

athletes' reasons for participating in sports was tailored to the research objectives. The questionnaire was divided into three parts. In this study only results from the third part will be presented. Results for the first two parts, in which athletes were asked to rate the reasons for choosing to start and continue participating in their sport, were published elsewhere (Orbach et al., 2021). In the third part, which included 20 items, the athletes were asked to rate obstacles that interfere with and/or make it difficult for them to participate in sports. A 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 ("not important at all") to 5 ("very important") was used for each item in the questionnaire. The items in the third part were divided into four themes: Factor 1 was labeled Coach Factor (CF) and pertained to the athlete's relationship with the coach (e.g., "The coach focuses on winning instead of on personal improvement"). CF included 7 items and the α Cronbach was .897. Factor 2 was termed External Factor (EF) and referred to external expectations from the athlete (e.g., "I feel I have no support from my family"). EF included 5 items and the α Cronbach was .827. The third factor was labeled No Success Factor (NSF) and included items relating to the athlete's actual and perceived success (e.g., I am not good enough). NSF included 4 items and the α Cronbach was .853. The fourth factor was labeled No Time Factor (NTF) and referred to the time the athlete can invest in sport (e.g., "I have difficulty doing sport and schoolwork together"). NTF included 4 items and the α Cronbach was .774. The items that represented these factors were selected by experts in the field of sport psychology specializing in youth competitive sport.

2.3. Procedures

The research protocol was investigated in a preliminary study using one team sport, basketball, and one individual sport, rhythmic gymnastics. The athletes completed the questionnaire, which took 25 - 30 minutes, anonymously. Initial data from the study were presented at an international conference in Madrid on Women's Sport Participation and Gender Equality in March 2019. The results about the obstacles young female athletes face while participating in sport are presented below.

3. Results

A three-way ANOVA with repeated measures (4 factors \times 3 age groups \times individual/team sport) was conducted to investigate differences among the four factors that raise obstacles to participation in competitive sports across age groups and individual and team sports. Results indicated a significant main effect for factors, $F(1, 952) = 67.93, p < 0.001$, a significant main effect for individual/team sport, $F(1, 952) = 11.97, p < 0.001$, a significant interaction between factors and individual/team sports and finally a significant interaction between factors, age groups, and individual/team sports, $F(2, 952) = 3.37, p < 0.035$.

Post-hoc test with Bonferroni adjustment for the main effect for factors indicated significant differences between all four factors with CF the lowest ($1.98 \pm$

1.14), followed by EF (2.04 ± 1.11), then NTF (2.11 ± 1.12), and finally NSF (2.32 ± 1.25).

The main effect for individual/team sports indicated that team sports reported a greater impact of obstacles (2.24 ± 0.05) as compared to individual sports ($2.00 \pm .05$). Post-hoc test with Bonferroni adjustment indicated a significant interaction between obstacles and individual/team sports. For individual sports, NSF was the strongest obstacle, compared to the other three, and NTF was greater than CF and EF. For team sports, NSF was also the strongest obstacle compared to the other three and NTF was greater than CF (see **Table 1** and **Figure 1**). The interaction between obstacles and age was not significant.

Significant interactions between obstacles, age groups and individual/team sports indicated the following results. In individual sport among young age, NSF was higher than all the other obstacles, which means that no success is the most dominant obstacle facing athletes in individual sports. In the middle and older age groups, NSF and NTF were higher than CF and EF (see **Figure 2**). This means that in older ages, time factor is an obstacle together with no success factor.

In team sports no significant obstacles were found among the young group. However, in the middle group NSF was the largest obstacle of the four. This means that no success is the most dominant obstacle compared to the other three. For the adult group NSF and NTF were higher than CF and EF (see **Figure 3**).

Table 1. Means and SD for the four obstacles to participating in competitive sport across individual/team sports.

	Individual	Team
CF = Coach Factor	1.83 ± 0.06	2.12 ± 0.05
EF = External Factor	1.9 ± 0.05	2.18 ± 0.06
NSF = No Success Factor	2.23 ± 0.06	2.43 ± 0.06
NTF = No Time Factor	2.05 ± 0.05	2.25 ± 0.05

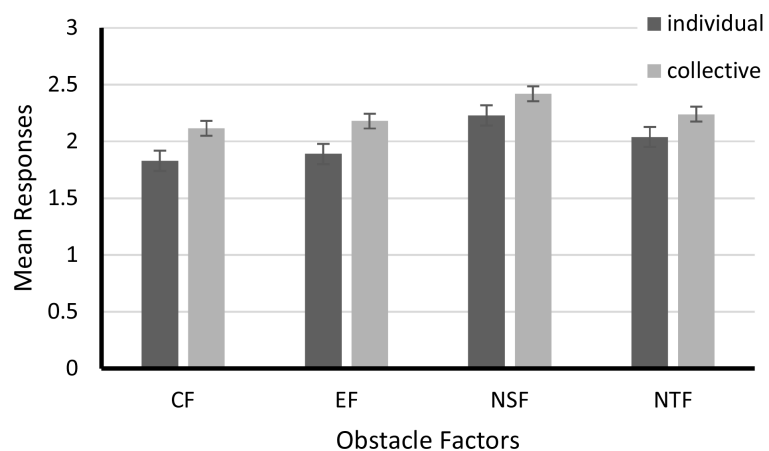


Figure 1. The differences between the four obstacles for participating in competitive sport across individual/team sports.

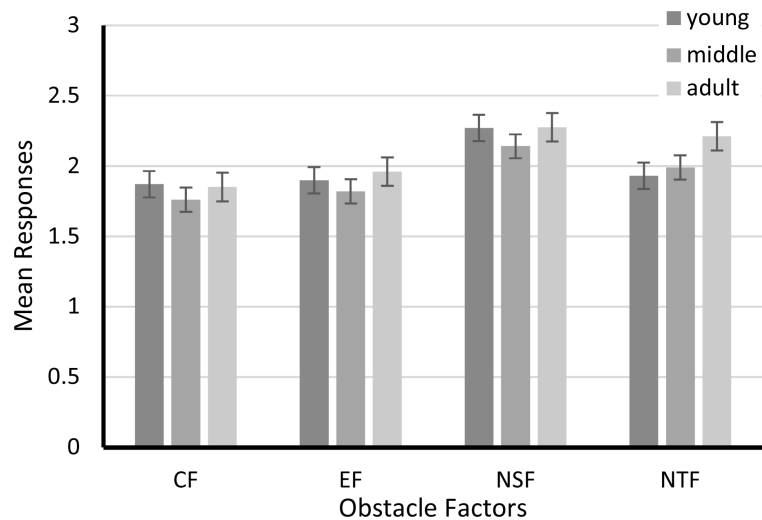


Figure 2. Differences between the four obstacles across age groups in individual sports.

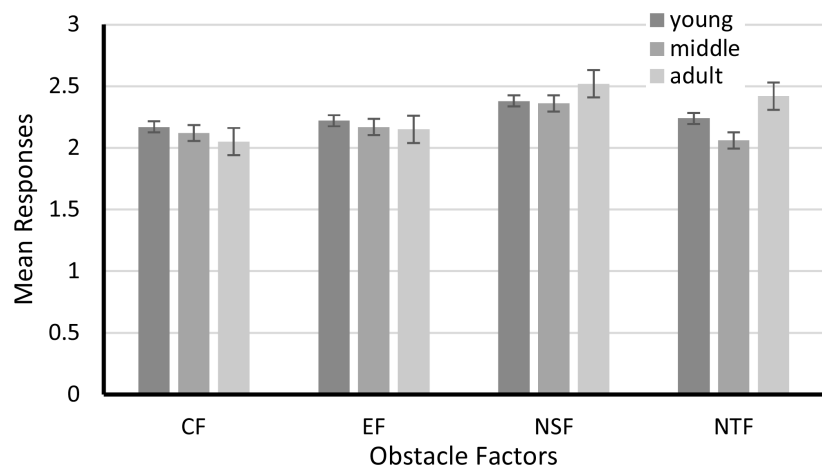


Figure 3. Differences between the four obstacles across age groups in team sports.

4. Discussion

The physical and mental benefits of participating in sport, for both genders, are well known (Crane & Temple, 2015). However, the number of girls participating in sports, as compared to boys, is very low (Bayyat, 2020). Therefore, the current study investigated the obstacles that girls face during their sport career. The rationale for the study is that awareness of the impediments girls face may generate an understanding of how to decrease dropout rates from competitive sports among young female athletes in individual and team sports.

The results indicate that among female athletes, perception of no success in the sport constitutes the most dominant obstacle to their participation and the reason for their dropping out. This trend can be seen across all sports and age groups. More specifically, the no success factor is the strongest obstacle to continued participation in individual and team sports across all age groups. An exception is the young age group (9 - 11 years old) in team sports, for which no specific obstacles were indicated by the athletes. This may be because in team

sports all players initially share responsibility for the team's success, and only at a later stage does the focus shift to emphasize individual achievements as well. Thus success/no success in team sports can be observed only after a period of experience (Eime et al., 2016).

These results are in line with data from previous studies which indicated the significant impact of perceived low competence as an obstacle that athletes face. Studies have indicated that perceived low abilities and low self-efficacy are major reasons for dropout from sport (Boiche & Sarrazin, 2009; Crane & Temple, 2015). Interestingly, enjoyment appears in the literature as a major source of motivation and adherence, but lack of enjoyment is interpreted as being attributable to lack of success and is linked to low perception of abilities. This result is in line with competence motivation theory which focuses on the motivation of children to feel competent in achievement settings and engage in mastery attempts so that they can display competence (Harter, 1981, 1992). It is possible to decrease the impact of "no success" in two major ways. First, and possibly the most important and realistic direction, is to provide athletes from a very young age with the mental environment and psychological skills to deal with pressure and demands. The motive of "competing against yourself and not against others" is an important point of view to strengthen athletes' self-efficacy. This is especially important within individual sport and requires special attention from the coach and the sport psychology consultant.

This recommendation is based on achievement goal orientation theory (Nicholls, 1984), and on self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ntoumanis & Mallett, 2014). Achievement goal orientation theory posits that to understand the motivation of young athletes it is necessary to understand the function and meaning of their goal directed action. The most beneficial direction is task orientation (Nicholls, 1984). Finally, according to self-determination theory, intrinsic motivation is considered to have the highest quality in terms of involvement in sports (Ryan & Deci, 2000). According to the researchers, creating high internal motivation in individuals requires that three basic psychological needs be met: autonomy (the level at which individuals perceive their behavior to be under their own control), competence (individuals' perception of their ability to perform a certain action/behavior) and relatedness (a sense of belonging created by forming relationships with others) (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Therefore, based on these theories and the results of this study, it is important to educate coaches on ways to create a positive mental environment during practice and to learn how to identify the specific strengths of each athlete. A competitive environment paired with pressure to win from a young age, with no mental support, can lead to a higher dropout rate (Zarrett et al., 2020). Furthermore, probably the most important point is to provide young athletes and coaching staff with the necessary psychological skills to deal with pressure that will enable athletes to adhere and improve over the long term. The psychological support requires systematic interaction between sport psychologists and the

young female athletes. It is important that sport psychologists be familiar with the sport, build a good relationship with the coach, and be aware of the developmental stages young female athletes go through.

Another dominant obstacle that was identified in the current study was the no time factor. Participants in the study were all school age, which means that in addition to being athletes, they were all full-time students as well. Most of the athletes attend regular schools and scholastic demands on them are the same as for non-athletes. Participants in the study reported lack of time as a major obstacle to motivation to engage in sport. This problem can be resolved or at least improved when the education system recognizes the importance of competitive sport activity and creates flexible and suitable learning environments which take sport demands into consideration while ensuring proper education for athlete-students.

5. Summary

The results of this study demonstrate motives for dropout from individual and team sport disciplines among young female athletes. Providing young female athletes with the appropriate psychological tools and supportive environment may increase the likelihood of successful long-term career in sport. This can be achieved by strengthening the psychological education program for coaches and by including a professional sport psychology consultant as part of the professional staff working with the young female athletes. In addition, it is important that the education system will be suitable for the lifestyle and high demands which are required from a professional young athlete. The data reflect the situation in a small country. This fact is critical since the number of talented athletes that can become top achievers in sport, represent the country in international events, and serve as local partners for practice, is relatively low. Taking this fact into consideration, it is crucial to ensure that coach and support team give special attention to the motivation of the young female athlete which may have an influence on their sports career.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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