

Young People's Socialisation into Sport: A Case Study of an Athletics Club

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ABSTRACT *This paper explores young people's (9 to 15 years old) early socialisation into sport. We draw on data from an 18-month-long ethnography of the junior section of an athletics club in England, using field notes, interviews and a psychometric questionnaire. We begin by noting a trend towards increasing numbers of younger children participating in adult-organised, community-based sport. Within this context, we investigate the extent to which Siedentop's [(1995) Junior Sport and the evolution of sport cultures, Keynote presentation to the Junior Sport Forum, Auckland, New Zealand] three main goals for young people's participation in sport, i.e. the educative, public health and elite development, are met in specific, local junior sport settings such as Forest Athletics Club (FAC). We report that most of the young people participating in the Introductory Groups at FAC begin their socialisation into sport by 'sampling' a range of sports and other activities that are available to them. We note the key features of the sampling phase for these young people, including their involvement in sports and other activities in addition to athletics, their reasons for participation, the place of competition and the importance of friendship. We report that FAC created a climate for the Samplers, intentionally or not, conducive to the development of Siedentop's educative goal, and to a lesser extent the public health and elite development goals. In concluding, we note the implications of the study for community-based programmes run by clubs.*

Introduction

In the last decade in Britain, as in other parts of the Western world, there has been a considerable expansion of the number of community sport clubs that make provision for children. The Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) report that there are over 11,000 amateur sports clubs throughout Britain (DCMS, 2001) with a relatively high and growing level of sports club membership (Sport England, 2000). On the basis of a survey of over 3000 young people aged between 6 and 16 years in 1999, Sport England estimated that nearly half of all children in Britain (46%) were or had been a member of a community-based sports club (Sport England, 2000). In addition, Sport England found that club membership amongst primary aged children increased between 1994 and 1999 from 38% to 42%. They also suggested that compared to secondary school age children, primary school children were more likely to report that they prefer doing sport than any other leisure time activity (Sport England, 2000). In another survey in 2000 carried out on behalf of the Nestlé *Family Monitor*, MORI reported that 80% of the adults surveyed believe sport to be a vital part of a child's development (MORI, 2000, p. 4). In short, more children appear to be participating in organised sport at a younger age than ever before, and this trend has the support of the majority of the British population.

In response to these trends, there have been a number of innovations in junior sport. Activities modified to suit children's physical, intellectual, social and emotional maturity are now commonplace in countries such as New Zealand (Kiwi Sport), Australia (Aussie Sport) and Britain (the TOP scheme). Similar developments are reported to have taken place in several continental European countries (De Knop *et al.*, 1996; Heinemann, 1999). These countries also have developed coach education and sport leader schemes and policies to guide the practice of junior sport. Increasingly, junior sport practices are informed by child protection legislation (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children & National Coaching Foundation, 1998).

These are significant developments for educational researchers in sport and physical education, even though they have for the most part been independent of school systems. These trends may also hold important implications for physical education teachers if increasing numbers of primary school age children appear to have experienced sport in a club setting prior to commencing secondary school physical education. Indeed, in light of Siedentop's (1994) critique of the traditional multi-activity form of physical education and his advocacy of Sport Education in its place, children's experiences of sport outside school physical education may be significant for the Key Stage 2 and 3 curricula.

In a community sport context, Siedentop (1995) has argued that there are three main goals for young people's participation in sport, the educative, public health and elite development goals. The educative goal seeks to develop in young people useful physical skills, cooperation, leadership skills, submerging personal interests for the common good, and perseverance. The public health goal seeks to develop in young people the knowledge and skills required to lead an active and healthy lifestyle. The elite development goal is to assist talented young people to pursue excellence in sport and to realise their full potential.

Siedentop (1995, pp. 5–6) argues that each of these goals is important in junior sport, but he suggests that they are currently in a state of imbalance. His view is that the pursuit of the elite development goal is dominant and attracts the majority of quality resources in terms of funding, facilities and coaching. For the public health goal to attain some level of equity with the elite development goal, he argues junior sport programmes would need to be centred on playful, health-related exercise. They also would need to include those young people most at risk of cardiovascular disease, exactly the group who are currently least likely to participate in sport programmes. For the educative goal to be on a par with the elite development goal, junior sport programmes would need to be inclusive, modified to fit the developmental needs of young people and administered in a way that reflected the educational benefits he lists. He provides his own Sport Education model (Siedentop, 1994) as an example of how the educative goal of junior sport might be realised in practice.

Siedentop's three goals provide a broad framework for thinking about the purposes and potential benefits of young people's participation in sport. As yet, however, we know very little about the nature of children's experiences of junior sport outside of schools and the extent to which each of these goals might be pursued and attained in specific and local settings. Nor do we know whether the innovations in policy, modified activities and coach education have made an impact on junior sport practices or school practices. There has been a considerable amount of survey research in junior sport, and the general characteristics of junior sport participation are now reasonably well known (Sport England, 2000). There has also been a considerable volume of questionnaire-based research investigating the psychological aspects of young people's experiences of sport participation (Duda, 2001; Gould & Petlichkoff, 1988). There has been less qualitative

and detailed study of the particularities of junior sport participation, and little attention paid to the social and cultural aspects of young people's experiences of sport. Although much of this experience takes place in the context of the sports club, very little research has been concerned with the club as a setting for junior sport, with the exception of studies such as those of De Knop and his colleagues in Belgium (De Knop *et al.*, 1994).

This paper draws on data from an 18-month ethnography of the junior section of an athletics club, 'Forest Athletics Club' (FAC), in the Midlands of England. We will argue that the young people's experiences of sport in this setting resembled several features of what Côté and Hay (2002) describe as the 'sampling phase' of young people's socialization into sport. We will also suggest that aspects of all three of Siedentop's three goals for junior sport were evident to some extent. We outline the key characteristics of this sampling phase as it applied to the young people who were members of the Introductory Groups at FAC. We report in turn on their involvement in a range of sports and other past times, their reasons for participation in athletics, peer relations and friendship, the place of competition and the relationship between deliberate play and deliberate practice. Before doing this, we provide a brief account of the design of the study.

Research Design

The research design required a multi-method approach within a single-site ethnographic study. The study combined data collection methods such as naturalistic observation and field notes, semi-structured group and individual interviews, and a set of validated questionnaires focused on the young people's motivational profiles.

Although all children are not the same, the group of young people at FAC were homogeneous in some respects. The social class background of the young people at FAC supports the notion that the parents of young people who are involved in club-based sporting activities in England and Wales tend to be in the higher socio-economic groups (English Sports Council, 1998; Rowe, 1999). The young people attending FAC were predominantly from higher socio-economic groups and this was reflected in the professional careers of a number of parents and consequently the occupational flexibility and greater mobility allowing parents more time to take their children to and from the club (Rowley, 1992). The majority of families were able to accommodate their child's continued participation in a number of activities through a commitment from the family in terms of finance, time and transportation (Kay, 2000; Kirk *et al.*, 1997a,b; Mason, 1995). In a large club there is obviously going to be a range of social class, and an increase in single parent families involved with children's sporting commitments was evident at FAC. The majority of the children were of white ethnic origin, supporting the suggestion that ethnic minority groups are under-represented in certain sports (Rowe, 1992). However, it has been reported that athletics, along with netball and hockey, attracts a significant proportion of ethnic minorities (English Sports Council, 1998). No young people at FAC were registered as disabled. FAC's commitment to 'cater for all' resulted in the young people involved in FAC being more clearly differentiated by age, gender and ability.

Ethnography

The primary purpose of ethnography is to capture the routine and everyday activities of the people who occupy a particular site and to understand the meaning of these activities

from the participants' point of view (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1984). Ethnography seeks to understand social life beyond surface appearances and to produce 'thick description' of social practices (Geertz, 1973). As a research strategy, ethnography is ideally suited to investigating dynamic and complex activities such as youth sport participation. This is because, in addition to generating thick description, ethnography requires regular in-depth contact with a research site and with the people in it over a prolonged period of time. Prolonged immersion in a research site assists the researcher to begin to recognise routine and repeating practices, cyclical and seasonal processes, and the complex patterning of social practice.

A special edition of *Arena Review*, 13(1), in May 1989 titled 'Ethnographic methods in the sociology of sport' introduced the reader to the method and rich tradition of sport ethnography, encouraging a change in the apparent quantitative monopoly in the study of sport. A number of authors comment on the value of the method and perspective of ethnography in providing insights and understanding in the context of sport (Gallmeier, 1989; Hadden *et al.*, 1989; MacAloon, 1992). However, sport ethnographies have tended to be concerned with adult performance in sport and have paid less attention to children's involvement in sport (Sports Council, 1996).

Forest Athletics Club

Forest Athletics Club (FAC, a pseudonym) is located in a large, relatively prosperous town in the Midlands of England. It is difficult to report an accurate number of people who access the club as the club not only has paid-up members participating but also those who choose not to pay a membership fee in favour of paying an entry charge every time they wish to participate in FAC training evenings. There is currently no annual membership fee for those over nine and less than 10 years of age. Those children over 10 and less than 17 years of age pay an annual fee of £12. In addition to the annual membership fee, the cost of attending each session at FAC is £2 for non-members and £1.20 for members.

The club caters for the entire range of track and field events and for cross country and road racing specialists. The club was founded in 1975 and at the time the research reported in this paper was carried out, the Chairman, Alan Black, was a founding member. According to Black, 'we've always right from the start emphasised that this is a family club, it's a family environment' (interview, 10 April 2000). The chairman promoted FAC as a 'family club', and implied that such a club encouraged all members of the family to be involved in assisting the running of the club, i.e. helping out in the selling of drinks and sweets on training evenings. At the same time he admitted that his concern was not with recruiting young people but with attracting and retaining good quality coaches to work with the large number of junior athletes the club already had. In asking the chairman which groups of athletes the club would be interested to know more about he suggested the Introductory Groups on a Monday and Wednesday evening.

The two Introductory Groups catered for children between the ages of nine and 15. The Monday Introductory Group tended to cater for up to 30 young people aged between nine and 11 while the Wednesday Introductory Group catered for almost 45 young people between the ages of 10 and 15. There was no formal membership of either Introductory Groups and young people could attend both if they wished. Young people's choice of attendance on a particular evening depended on when they had a free night from other leisure activities or an evening where it was suitable for their parents or

guardian to transport them to FAC. For those who were more established in either group they tended to maintain attendance on that particular night in order to meet up with friends. The ratio of boys to girls varied throughout the 18 months, with boys outnumbering girls on some occasions and girls outnumbering boys on others. Occasionally an equal number of boys and girls attended sessions.

Activities were repeated over a considerable number of Introductory Group sessions and varied in relation to the groups training indoors or outdoors. When training indoors during the winter the focus was mainly on the events that made up Sports Hall athletics, a competition structure in which FAC entered teams. Such events incorporated standing long jump, speed bounce and running a specific number of lengths of the hall. When training outdoors at the track drills specific to running and short relay sprints were the norm. Field event practices were more prominent on Monday evenings. Modified throwing equipment allowed children the opportunity to experience javelin and the three phases of the triple jump, hop-step-jump, were frequently practised.

During the 18 months that data reported in this paper were collected, the majority of the young people attending either Introductory Groups did not move out of the groups into a more specialised training group, i.e. a group identified by one discipline such as high jump or middle-distance running. There was no formalised progression to such groups and consequently young people appeared quite happy to remain in the Introductory Groups. Those young people who did move out of the Introductory Groups into a more specialised group are currently being followed by the research team. However, this paper is only concerned with reporting and discussing the ways in which the Introductory Groups at FAC encouraged socialisation into sport for young people.

Field Observations and Field Notes

Observations and field notes of the Monday and Wednesday Introductory Groups at FAC (9–13-year-olds), including attendance at training sessions on Mondays and Wednesdays, club meetings and competitions, were carried out between September 1999 and December 2000. The first author of this paper (Ann) carried out the observations of both Introductory Groups and the individuals within them and interviewed the children, parents and coaches. Field notes containing the results of observations were kept by Ann and were written when she was not *in situ*. The field notes primarily recorded impressions, conversations, observations, comments, behaviour, events and activities and views of participants (Cohen *et al.*, 2000) in the Introductory Groups at FAC. Although not a member of FAC, she did train with the club once a week and carry out observations on another evening. The young athletes being very accommodating in sharing information rewarded the investment of time that the author put in to attending training sessions and weekend competitions.

As the study progressed, Ann became less of a detached observer from the side of the track and more of a participant, helping with the warm-ups and setting out equipment, looking after discarded kit, and chatting with the children. Ann also began to attend regional indoor competitions, in which FAC participated, and undertook the roles of timekeeper and scorer. This perhaps resulted in the young athletes perceiving Ann's role as a volunteer or helper and consequently allowed her to follow and watch closely specific groups, as well as individuals within those groups, without interfering or compromising the established management of the group. At the same time Ann was cautious about having a presence that would not interfere with the situation, attempting to be as natural a part of the situation as possible. Raley (2001) has used the term

'shadowing' to convey the relative (in)visibility of the researcher in similar situations. Field observations, and the notion of shadowing, entailed watching and recording the activities of the coaches and athletes throughout the training sessions in both indoor and outdoor settings. This paper is based mainly on interview data generated during the first year of contact with the club. Young people, coaches and parents were interviewed once. All the names of those interviewed have been changed.

Interviews

Ann carried out small group interviews with 47 children between the ages of nine and 15 years, two thirds of whom were boys. These small group interviews were completed either in the FAC clubhouse or in an area adjoining indoor facilities in early 2000. The coaches were very accommodating in allowing small groups of friends to leave the session for 10 minutes at a time to undertake group interviews. Children were asked what their motivation for attending the club was, who their friends were and whether they attended the club and other interests they had apart from athletics.

Interviews with the club chairman and the five coaches involved with coaching the youth section of FAC were carried out by Ann between January and July 2000. Mark was the coach of the Monday group in the first year of shadowing and Steve in the second year. Karen and Lisa were responsible for the Wednesday group. Gordon was the club's coach coordinator and a specialist high jump coach. Although not directly involved with the kids in the Monday or Wednesday Introductory Groups, his remit was to have an interest in FAC's provision in addressing the needs of young people. On occasions he attended the Wednesday group indoor sessions to assist with coaching high jump to those who were hoping to compete in the event in up and coming indoor competitions. Karen and Gordon had four and eight years of coaching experience, respectively, while Lisa had 16 years experience. Mark and Steve in comparison could be considered coaching novices each with only two years of coaching experience. They both held a Level 1 coaching award and the other three coaches possessed a higher level of coaching award.

The coaches were again accommodating in arranging interview times that varied from meeting after a coaching session to meeting on another day all together. In the instance where more than one coach was undertaking the Wednesday session it was possible to interview one coach while the others oversaw the session. Coaches were asked what their personal involvement in athletics and in coaching was, what motivates them to be involved, likes and dislikes of coaching, what they believed the role and function of the club and parents to be and their philosophy of working with young people.

Interviews with parents were carried out by Ann between May and June 2000 and proved more difficult to arrange times with than coaches. Eight parents were interviewed (five female and three male) and were approached because they had been identified by the coaches as parents of children who attend the club regularly (i.e. once a week). Those interviewed included two single parents, a father who was a member of FAC and ran with a group while his children trained and parents who help out to different extents during club training evenings. Two parents did not come down to the club with their children due to work commitments or other family commitments. Parents were aged between 36 and 49 years of age with five parents working full-time and three working part-time.

It was easier to talk with those who brought their children to the club for training by interviewing them while their child was training. Interviews took place in an office not

far from the track or on the pavilion steps if the weather was favourable. In one instance a parent agreed to be interviewed at home as they never attended the club with their young daughter. Parents were asked questions about their own child's involvement in the club and other interests they pursue, their envisaged role as a parent whose child attends a sport club and the level of their own sport participation.

From the field notes and interviews we identified text segments, attached category labels to the segments and sorted all text segments that related to a specific category or theme. Similar to the constant comparative method of analysing the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), the data were manually reviewed repeatedly and continually coded, looking for similarities and differences, groupings, patterns and items of particular significance (Creswell, 1994; Mason, 1996; Rubin & Rubin, 1995). The strength of the evidence presented in this paper is a matter of judgement, i.e., it is not free from potential bias. The goal is to discover the correct manner of interpreting whatever data have been collected (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1984).

Motivational Profile Questionnaires

Central to the achievement of Siedentop's (1995) educative goal is the notion that sport provides young people with 'goods' or benefits internal to sport that can only be gained through whole-hearted participation. The English Sports Council (1997) support this notion by advocating that everyone should have the right to play for fun and not necessarily with a view to competing or winning. The research literature in sport psychology, sociology and physical education also supports this notion of goods internal to sport as primary reasons for participation. Collectively, this literature reports that the reasons young people participate in sport are improving skills, having fun, being with friends, experiencing thrills and excitement, achieving success, and developing fitness (e.g. Gill *et al.*, 1983; Gould & Petlichkoff, 1988; Gould *et al.*, 1985; O'Reilly *et al.*, 2001; Whitehead, 1988). Often 'fun and enjoyment' is reported to be the most important reason and 'winning' the least important (e.g. Clough *et al.*, 1993; Scanlan & Lewthwaite, 1986; Wankel & Kriesel, 1985).

Consistent with these findings, and in an effort to triangulate the observations made within the field notes and interviews, a group of young athletes ($N=51$; 66% girls) were asked to complete a questionnaire consisting of measures of enjoyment, motivation, achievement goal orientation, and perceived motivational climate. This group of young athletes was slightly different from the interview group where two thirds of the young people were boys. These differences highlight the variable weekly make-up of the groups in terms of the proportions of girls and boys who attended either of the two sessions at FAC. It was not possible to find the exact same individuals attending the Introductory Group sessions on any two separate instances. Consequently, any attempt to target the exact same individuals would have been a false reflection of the situation within the Introductory Groups at FAC.

The questionnaires were administered in July 2000 and were completed in the FAC clubhouse by a group of young athletes similar to those who had taken part in the group interviews. That is, girls and boys who had recently joined the club were not asked to complete a questionnaire. These psychological constructs were selected because they seemed to resonate with emergent ideas from the field notes and interviews and because they have been used extensively in the field of sport psychology in an attempt to understand why young people participate in sport (Treasure & Roberts, 1995; Wang & Biddle, 2001).

Enjoyment was measured using a subscale from the Intrinsic Motivation Inventory (McAuley *et al.*, 1989). The Perceived Locus of Causality scale (PLOC; Goudas *et al.*, 1994) was used to assess the degree to which the young people were intrinsically motivated. The PLOC yields four subscales reflecting different levels of self-regulation of behaviour. By weighting each subscale according to the level of autonomy an indicator of an individual's motivational orientation can be gained. More positive scores indicate intrinsic regulation (e.g. participating for goods or benefits internal to the activity such as enjoyment) and negative scores indicate more extrinsic regulation (e.g. participating for external rewards, such as status or money).

Achievement goal orientation was assessed using the English (UK) version of the Task and Ego Orientation in Sport Questionnaire (TEOSQ; Duda & Whitehead, 1998). The TEOSQ produces two subscales: task orientation (reflecting the degree to which individuals define success in terms of mastery or task improvement) and ego orientation (reflecting the degree to which success is defined in normative terms, that is, by winning or outperforming others). Perceived motivational climate refers to how participants view the social climate created by leaders. The leaders can be perceived as creating either a climate where self-improvement is emphasised (task climate) or a climate where outcome or doing better than others is emphasised (performance climate). The Perceived Motivational Climate in Sport Questionnaire Version 2 (Newton *et al.*, 2000) was used to assess these perceptions. All measures employed have been shown to have adequate psychometric properties.

Young People's Socialisation into Sport

According to Côté and Hay (2002) young people's socialisation into sport follows a general pattern: sampling, specialising and investing. The key features of the 'sampling' phase are that children participate in a range of sports, that their key motivation is fun and enjoyment, and that the emphasis is on structured or deliberate play rather than training or deliberate practice. Côté and Hay define deliberate play as organised activities designed to provide enjoyment through active and pleasurable participation. Deliberate practice involves activities specifically designed to improve the current level of performance and are not inherently enjoyable.

From the sampling phase, young people may either drop out of a sport, move into the 'recreation years' or move into the 'specialising' phase. The recreation years are where young people participate regularly in sports without aspiring to reach an elite level of performance while the specialising phase involves more deliberate practice and a reduction in the range of sport activities. From the specialising phase Côté and Hay suggest a young person has three options. The first is to drop out of a sport, the second is to enter what they call the recreational phase where sport is played relatively informally and for fun, and the third is the 'investment' phase. Entry into the investment phase usually signals a focus on one activity and a commitment to intensive training and competitive success. Côté and Hay's three phases of sport participation are outlined in Fig. 1. This paper is concerned with reporting and examining experiences of young people within the sampling phase.

We found strong evidence to suggest that the majority of the young people in the two Introductory Groups at FAC (9–13-year-olds) were 'Samplers'. They were Samplers, we propose, in terms of the range of activities they were involved in, their key motives for participation, the place of competition in their experiences of athletics, and the emphasis on deliberate play. We set out this evidence below. These features of the sampling

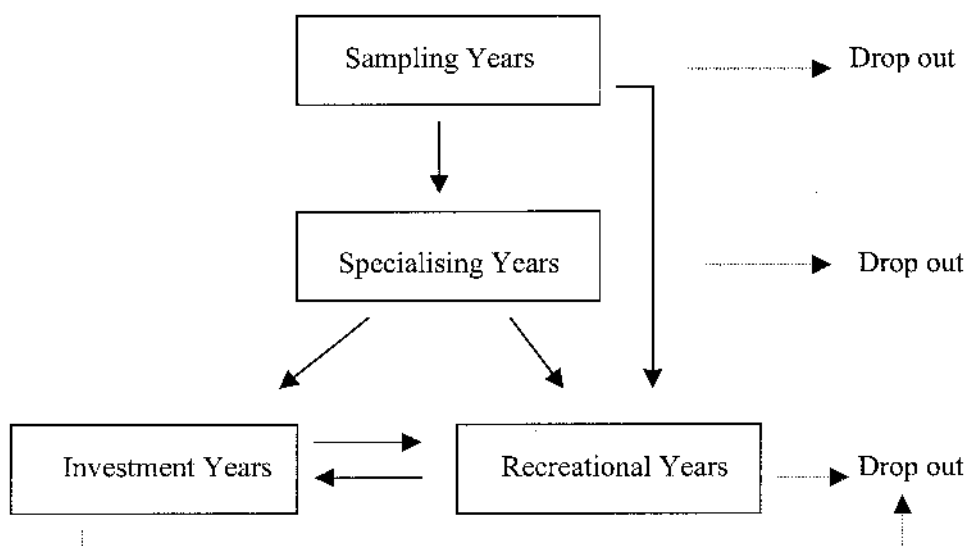


FIG. 1. Côté and Hay's three phases of sport participation (Côté & Hay, 2002).

activity of the young people at FAC suggested to us some aspects of Siedentop's educative and public health goals were being pursued at FAC.

Characteristics of the Sampling Phase at FAC

Building on the key features of the sampling phase mentioned in the above section, we move on to report and discuss characteristics of the sampling phase that were evident through young people's involvement in the Introductory Groups at FAC. These included involvement in a range of sports and other activities, experiencing enjoyment and fun, competition, fitness and health benefits, deliberate play and friendships and peer relations.

'Do You Want Me to Name Them All?': Involvement in a Range of Sports and Other Activities

One of the most striking aspects of the lives of the young people in the Introductory Groups at FAC was how busy they were and how many sporting and other activities they participated in, in addition to athletics. We suggest that this range of activities is a defining characteristic of the sampling phase of sport socialisation, where 'young people' are literally trying out a range of different options available to them. Consequently, sampling behaviour is a key feature of the sport experience of young people in the 9–15 age group.

Many of the younger athletes (in the age range 9–13) at FAC were involved in trying out a range of sports. One girl, Jo, asked, 'Do you want me to name them all? Cricket, football, I like rugby but my mum won't let me play it, volleyball. I had trials for the county at cricket and play football for the school. Volleyball I just like'. Kevin was involved in 'swimming, cross country, football, rugby, cricket, badminton'. These two young people were typical of the younger members of the FAC Introductory Groups.

However, it was also the case that sport competed for the children's time with a range of other activities. Susan had just auditioned for the school skipping team and competed in cross-country for her school, but also played clarinet and recorder. Kevin balanced his sport with reading, playing games on the computer, horse-riding trips with his family and drama. Jenny split her free time between the athletics club, Girls' Brigade and playing the violin, and she planned to find time to 'get back to netball'.

A key feature of the sampling phase appeared to be an ongoing shifting of priorities as young people literally sample the sports available to them. This sampling process was evident when Stuart explained the involvement of his daughter in sports:

[Claire] used to be extremely interested in swimming and was asked if she wanted to join the local swimming club but turned that down due to the athletics. She used to do dancing then swimming got in the way and swimming came before dancing and now athletics comes before the swimming. She wants to carry on with athletics. (Parent interview, 12 June, 2000)

As a group, these young people attending FAC saw sport as only one of a number of things they could do in their free time. Most, particularly the younger children, attended FAC only once a week, on either a Monday or a Wednesday, so that they could fit in their other activities. We propose then that the members of the Introductory Groups were 'Samplers' in sport because they had the opportunity and the means to be so through a supportive family set-up. But there were other features that suggested the existence of a sampling phase in the sport experiences of the young people at FAC relating to their reasons for participation.

Fun and Enjoyment

Interviews and other less structured conversations with the young people revealed that enjoyment and fun were prominent reasons for attending FAC. Responding to the questionnaire, the majority of young people reported high levels of enjoyment of athletics, with a mean response of 4.1 on a 5-point scale. This finding is consistent with the literature reviewed earlier. The principal reasons given by young people for participating at FAC were largely intrinsic, with high intrinsic motivation scores on the PLOC inventory (mean RAI = 14.88, SD = 9.86). These high scores reflect a focus on participation in athletics for enjoyment, learning, and the challenge inherent in the activity, key aspects of Siedentop's educative goal.

Fun and enjoyment were clearly important and prominent reasons for the young people's continued participation in the Introductory Groups at FAC, although young people's perception of what makes their participation fun and enjoyable may change as they experience different levels of involvement (Wankel & Kriesel, 1985). From the data that we report in the next section, it is feasible to suggest that fun for the younger children involved in the sampling phase comes from the social element and play. When young people start specialising there is evidence to suggest that fun is more closely related to the excitement of competition and performing.

The Place of Competition in the Sampling Phase

When interviewed, none of the children at the younger end of the age range (9–11 years of age) mentioned a desire to compete or to win as a motivation for participating in athletics. The lack of focus on competition and outcomes is also reflected in responses to

the goal orientation questionnaire with the younger athletes indicating, on average, a high task orientation (4.2/5) and a low ego orientation (2.7/5). For these young people, success is primarily viewed in terms of mastery and self-improvement, rather than outperforming others or winning. In addition, the majority of the group (78.7%) demonstrated the motivationally adaptive profiles of high task and either high or low ego orientation. A high task orientation is seen as important because a focus on self-improvement provides a buffer when normative competence (ego) is threatened.

Three issues related to the notion of competition were identifiable. First, our field observations of the two Introductory Groups suggested that competition was deliberately down played by the coaches, while everyone was expected to have a go at the full range of activities on offer. These are the conditions Siedentop (1995) suggests are necessary for the educative goal to be met. There appeared to be an acceptance among most of the coaches that youngsters would not necessarily want to be involved in formal competition. During an informal conversation, one of the coaches was asked if he would encourage his athletes to compete in the FAC's club championships. He said that he would, 'but at the same time I would be prepared to work with those that did not want to compete' (field notes, 23 August 1999). The parents we interviewed felt that their children's participation in athletics was primarily for fun and 'doing your best' rather than winning. Colin explained that his 10-year-old son had entered an open graded meeting because he likes the idea of 'having a go' but is not particularly interested in competing. Another parent admitted that 'it's nice to win but it's not the be all and end all'. The idea of 'personal bests' was mentioned by another mother who commented that 'sport should be about enjoyment, winning is a bonus. As long as they do it to the best of their ability ... all about PBs [personal bests]'.

Second, the questionnaire responses showed that, on the whole, the club climate was perceived by the young people to be task oriented, with a perceived emphasis on self-improvement and mastery. However, boys (mean ego score = 37.32) had significantly higher perceptions of an ego climate compared to the girls (mean ego score 29.76: $F(2,43) = 5.47, p < 0.05$). This suggests that the boys' perceptions were that the coaches emphasised winning and outperforming more so than the girls' perceptions. While the boys were intrinsically motivated as evidenced by a positive RAI, with a mean score of 10.8, they were significantly less intrinsically motivated than the girls, whose mean score was 17.14 ($F(1,40) = 4.320, p < 0.05$). We noted in our field observations that boys who had previously been rowdy in their involvement in the Introductory Groups at FAC became more compliant later in the sampling phase as formal competition and outcomes became prominent for them. For example, on one occasion:

Mark [Introductory Group Coach] explained the change in behaviour may be due to the competition that the boys experience amongst themselves and that they are aware that there are only a number of places available on teams in competition leagues for them to take part in their preferred event. (field note, 26 March 2001)

Unfortunately, at the time of writing we do not have data that can help us understand the nature of the gendered differences suggested above. This information is currently being collected in the continuation of our involvement with FAC where we are now focusing on those young people who are beginning to move into what Côté and Hay term the 'specilising phase'.

Third, in general, the older Samplers, both boys and girls aged between 13 and 15, viewed competition and winning as increasingly important for them. The older athletes had an opportunity to participate in formal competition in the shape of Sports Hall

athletics, an indoor competition held over the winter months. By virtue of having been in the club longer than the younger Samplers, the older Samplers were also more likely to have competed in some of FAC's own graded meetings in the spring and summer. Preparing for the goal of competition signalled an important shift for these young people in the balance between deliberate play and deliberate practice, where training had begun to have an objective of improving their chances of winning medals in competition.

Fitness and Health

Fitness and health benefits also emerged as important reasons for young people's participation in athletics at FAC, reflecting the findings of earlier studies by Gill *et al.* (1983) and Gould *et al.* (1985) and supporting Siedentop's (1995) suggestion that junior sport can achieve a public health goal. Many FAC Samplers mentioned that athletics helped them stay healthy and perceived athletics to be a sport that helped develop fitness. Some of the Samplers saw this characteristic of athletics as useful for their other sports. For example, Craig commented, 'I play football ... and the running makes you fitter and faster at running so it's easier to play football'. In an interview, Craig's mother confirmed that he initially attended FAC to help his football training rather than to 'do athletics'. For Ellie, athletics 'does keep me fit as well because I do gymnastics' and for Matt athletics 'keeps me healthy as I find it hard to find other sports that take [my] heart rate up'. A number of young people such as Gary attended the club 'to get better at running', while Jim and Tom wanted to be able to 'run faster'. Wanting to 'get fitter' or 'keep fit' was a popular answer from the young athletes at FAC in response to being asked why they attended the club.

Deliberate Play in the Sampling Phase

According to Côté and Hay (2002), a characteristic of the sampling phase is deliberate play which, as explained earlier, are activities designed to provide enjoyment and involves immediate gratification and is intrinsically motivating. It was not unusual for the younger athletes at FAC to experience a number of different activities within one session. The preference of the coaches and the young people appeared to be for activities that were structured yet did not focus overly on technique. Extracts from the field observations made of Steve's sessions provide an example of deliberate play.

Steve asked 'Who wants to play a game?' (...) The kids cheered when Steve said the game was like 'Bumper Cars', a game where you cross arms and bump into each other. (...) When he introduced moving like a crab he joined in and the kids appeared to find this entertaining. (field note, 20 November 2000)

When doing the sit ups, Steve encouraged the kids to make rasping noises—I assume to get them used to the idea of breathing out as they sit up and breathing in on the way down. They seemed to enjoy making the noise. (...) Steve then set up what the kids identified as a 'Grand Prix'—similar to an obstacle course where the kids were asked to hurdle, use the reverse boards and the speed bounce. (field note, 4 December 2000)

This approach to introducing young people to various activities in the form of deliberate play appeared to enhance the enjoyment of being involved with the youth section of FAC as athletes. As Samplers, the young athletes appeared to identify more with having a good time with others in their group than the activities that they undertook. Some

sessions were on occasion hard work for the children, but there was no heavy training regime. And while there was a concern among coaches to make sure children learned the rudiments of athletics events, learning appeared to be of secondary importance to participation, particularly for the younger Samplers, where participation itself appeared to be sufficient motivation to attend.

Friendships and Peer Relations

Evidence from the interviews highlighted that in a number of cases enjoyment appeared to depend not only on being involved in a range of activities at FAC but also being involved with already established friends. For example, one group of boys, Garry, Craig and Jim, attended the same school and were in the same class. Another five or six boys from their school also attended the Monday group. Craig was the first to join the club about two years ago and told others about it. Most of their friends from school come to the club. Most of these friends also played football together for a local team, suggesting a tight-knit friendship group.

The importance for some young people of having someone to attend the club with was very evident. Lisa admitted, 'I started last summer with Tiffany' and Sarah stated, 'I go to school with Ellie and she encouraged me to come'. At the same time being with a friend initially was important, it was not necessarily significant to continuing involvement. For Kelly, 'when I first started my friend introduced me into it ... She's left and I've made new friends', while Sally said, 'I came with my friend but she doesn't come anymore'.

Some young people joined the club having no friends at FAC. But making friends at the club was an important factor in continuing participation. Alisdair said, 'I haven't got any friends who come down with me but made loads of friends [here]. Most of my friends play football, swim and play tennis and they don't have time to come down—I've asked them'. This situation led to most of the young athletes identifying two groups of friends—friends from school and friends from FAC. In some cases the friends they made at FAC were by no means secondary to friends at school. Jo told us she had 'made a lot of friends [at FAC] because I've been coming for three years. Having a sleep over on Friday and most people from athletics will be there'. John, the father of two girls who attend FAC, commented that both girls are keen to arrive at the club early to allow them to talk to the friends they have made at the club before training begins.

While most of the children mentioned friends and friendship as an aspect of the experience of sport at FAC, it was the older Samplers who placed particular emphasis on friends. Indeed, most if not all of the older children who had been at the club for more than one season were part of a friendship group. This may suggest that having friends within a club is an important condition for continuing participation in a sport towards the specialising phase, even though the nature of their engagement in sport is becoming more serious.

Discussion

We began this paper by noting that there appears to be more of a trend in the UK and elsewhere towards community-based clubs making more provision for younger children than previously, a development that has the approval of the majority of adults in Britain. We also noted the relative paucity of qualitative research into young people's experiences

of sport within community settings, and particularly in relation to the social and cultural aspects of participation.

We found evidence in this study of two Introductory Groups at FAC over an 18-month period to support Côté and Hay's suggestion that particular young people's (9–15-year-olds) earliest experiences of sport involve sampling the range of sports and other activities that are available to them. The key features of the sampling phase shaped the young people's experiences of sport in general and of athletics at FAC in particular. A prominent feature was that the young people at FAC are involved in a range of activities, as proposed by Côté and Hay's theory. The range of activities tended to relate to sporting activities at the sampling stage, supporting Sport England's claim that primary school children (i.e. the younger Samplers aged between nine and 11) are more likely to report that they prefer doing sport more than any other leisure time activities (Sport England, 2000). In addition, for Samplers, participation in sport is strongly motivated by feelings of fun and that, consistent with this, most Samplers have relatively high task orientations where doing your best is emphasised above winning. They were for the most part supported in this by parents and coaches. Although there was not a requirement for the young people to engage in formal competition, we noted that competitiveness was not completely absent from the sessions at FAC.

This was properly so, however, since Siedentop (1994) argues that competition is a defining feature of sport. Of key importance to the achievement of Siedentop's (1995) educative goal for junior sport is how competition is presented to young people. Our conclusion, based on the evidence presented in this paper, is that by and large the coaches, club officials and parents at FAC, intentionally or not, had created a climate conducive to the development of the educative goal. Modified athletics activities were widely used at FAC, and all coaches had undertaken some form of coach education course. There was little evidence, however, that the climate developed at FAC was due to the application of national policies for junior sport or careful planning, and was more likely the result of the intuition and hard work of coaches, club officials and parents.

The realisation of the educative goal was most clearly evidenced in the older Samplers who had been attending the club regularly for more than one season and who were moving towards specialisation in one area of athletics. These older Samplers (13–15-year-olds) talked about the importance of friendship to their continuing participation, and their enjoyment of competition as their source of fun. The club's provision of deliberate play, their emphasis on providing all young people with experience of the wide range of modified activities as an introduction to athletics, and opportunities to compete if they wished, would appear to have assisted in this process.

There is less evidence to suggest that FAC intended to pursue a public health goal through their work with the Samplers, although it might be argued that exercise for health is intrinsic to the types of activities that make up athletics. This was certainly the understanding many of the young people had of athletics, that it contributed to their health and fitness, and indeed some were using their experiences at FAC to aid their performance in other sports.

It is the capacity to investigate some of the more subtle and less explicit aspects of young people's experiences, such as their alternative conceptions of athletics from those of their coaches and parents, that is one of the strengths of an ethnographic approach. The younger Samplers not only viewed athletics as a means of keeping fit, a notion that was rarely expressed by the coaches, but they also had little sense of a need to be involved in formal competition. This latter notion was evident to the coaches and indeed was supported by them and guided their practice.

Siedentop (1995) has argued that the elite development goal may be incompatible with the educative and public health goals for junior sport, since it seems to demand early talent identification and specialisation. This may be the common practice currently in many sports. But our study suggests that early talent identification and specialisation may be counterproductive. Certainly, some degree of competitive success and enjoyment of competition itself was a factor in retaining the participation of the older Samplers at FAC. But other factors were also important, as we saw, such as friendship and the freedom on the part of the young people themselves to choose which activities they will participate in. It appears to us that the younger Samplers at FAC needed the time and experience of a range of activities to make informed choices on their own behalf and to develop a concept of sports participation. Along with the now well-documented risk of burn-out, too early specialisation may result in many of the younger people being lost to sport prematurely, before they have had an opportunity to make sense of sport participation in their own terms.

There are important implications of these features of the sampling phase for the organisation of junior sport. The notion that young people at age nine to the age of 14 or 15 should be faithful to one sport only is, we suggest, unrealistic and not in the best interests of the young person. Yet it is this principle that has underpinned the sport development strategies of National Governing Bodies of some sports in Britain and elsewhere. Perhaps there is a need for sports authorities to approach the organisation of the sampling phase differently, and to encourage rather than prohibit young people from experiencing a range of sports before they specialise.

The multi-sports club, already well established in some European countries (De Knop *et al.*, 1994), may have the potential to diminish rivalry between sports' governing bodies and capitalise on young people's desire, demonstrated in this study, to sample the range of sports and other activities available to them. Such an approach would encourage clubs like FAC to establish relationships with other local sports clubs to promote participation in physical activities. One of the benefits of this notion of a multi-sports club may be that individual clubs would not apply pressure on young people to specialise early in only one sport. It may also be the case that a consortium of clubs has a better chance of retaining young people in sport if they offer them opportunities to experience a range of activities. On the other hand, one potential drawback may be that young people feel obliged to be actively involved in all sports linked with the multi-sport club.

Our involvement with FAC continues and we are now focusing on those young people from the Introductory Groups who are beginning to move into what Côté and Hay term the 'specialising phase'. However, there is still a need for further case study research in the early years of young people's socialisation into sport. Such research may support or dispute the evidence reported in this paper in respect to the strong presence of Côté and Hay's sampling phase and of Siedentop's educative goal in the provision of junior sport. Is FAC a true reflection of how UK sport clubs accommodate young people interested in participating in a specific sport? Are Siedentop's other goals of public health and elite development the preferred targets of other clubs catering for junior athletes? Also, to what extent are the messages that young people receive from participating in community-based sport reinforced or undermined within school physical education programmes? We predict that as younger and younger children become involved in adult-organised, community-based sports, the nexus between children's experiences in this setting and in school physical education may become a focus of increasing importance for researchers, policy makers, teachers, coaches and parents in the decade ahead.

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