Why Young Athletes Fail to Reach Their Full Potential

And How to Help Them Reach It

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Abstract

In the world of sports, and in many other fields for that matter, there are always talented young people who are seen as child prodigies. Child prodigies are seen as children who can perform at a level similar to adults in their field (Feldman and Morelock, 2011). Some do manage to reach their full potential and become all-time great professional athletes. However, many fail to reach the level that they once thought they could achieve. There are a variety of factors that may play a role such as mental health, injury, a lack of motivation, and poor guidance, among many other things. With that in mind, there are ways to mitigate the effects of these factors. For example, improved coaching, support from parents, positive goal setting, and mental and physical therapy so that these young athletes may get one step closer to becoming professional athletes.

Chapter One: Introduction

Introduction

The professional sports landscape is one of the most difficult and treacherous industries to be a part of. From a young age, those who want to make it as a professional athlete must dedicate their childhood and adolescence to making it happen. Of course, not every young athlete makes it to the professional ranks of their sport, but that does not stop them, or their families, from such pursuits. Statistically speaking, fewer than 2% of National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) student-athletes become pro athletes; of the over 460,000 NCAA student-athletes, most will become professionals in something other than sports (NCAA, 2014). For reference, the National Collegiate Athletic Association is the governing body for Division I, II, and III college athletics in the United States (NCAA, 2022). Regardless, millions of children participate in sports. The issue is the problems that may be associated with these pursuits and how they can hinder a child's ability to participate and ultimately make it to the next level.

With young athletes spending most of their lives devoted to a sport, a variety of factors start to impact their performance. Some factors include mental and physical health, financial troubles, substance abuse, injuries, poor goal setting, a lack of motivation, and the decline in youth sport participation to name a few (Stankovich, 2018). When examining each factor, one discovers that, at first glance, they are all very different, yet these factors may overlap in many cases. Much of what is mentioned above may not even be in the child's control, but it is something that affects them, and sometimes, there is no support so that their situation can improve.

These factors affect a young athlete's potential in sport. Finding solutions to mitigate the effects should be of utmost importance to coaches, parents, governing bodies, and to the athletes themselves. At every level, success for the team and its players is the main priority of the coach. By supporting their players, coaches can maximize their athletic output. Parents should always support their children regardless of sports. However, in some cases, parents force their children into a sport, so that the children may become professional athletes (Brunt, 2017). Regardless of parents' motivations, if their children participate in a sport, they should support them at every step of the way. Governing bodies have a duty to support their sports at all levels, as the young athletes are the future of the sport. Above all the stakeholders listed, young athletes are by far the most important. If their goal is to become a professional athlete, then these young athletes must take the necessary steps to achieve that goal. They will require support along the way, but it must be their job to accomplish their personal goals.

The goal of becoming a professional athlete may be a strong motivator to participate in youth sports, but many steps must be taken to get a child to that level and there are many obstacles they will face. From health and well-being to criminality and goal setting, there is an abundance of factors that can curb a young athlete's ability to reach their full potential. Although some athletes are seen as childhood prodigies from a young age, they may never get to the level they were always expected to reach. Child prodigies are children that are seen as capable of performing at similar levels as adults in their field (Feldman and Morelock, 2011). By outlining these factors, one can develop solutions so all the parties involved in a child's athletic journey can help the young athletes reach their full potential.

Statement of the Problem

Many young athletes aspire to be like the professionals they look up to. To reach those ranks, there are a several routes a young athlete could pursue such as playing sports in college or playing in minor leagues. It is difficult to reach the professional level and there are so many reasons why. Some of these reasons include: a lack of motivation and direction, poor mental and or physical health, and a decrease in sport participation. Many young athletes tend to rely upon natural skill alone while focusing on low level accolades, like youth league trophies, instead of learning and improving so they may hone their skills for the next level. Furthermore, young athletes struggle with accountability. This causes them to struggle with overcoming adversity, which, in the sports industry, is a regular occurrence (Stankovich, 2018). The inability to set effective goals and overcome obstacles may deter one's desire to compete and improve. With 46.6 million people in the United States alone suffering from mental illness, it is something that impacts athletes of all ages as well. 33% of student-athletes report struggling with mental health, while 35% of professional athletes experience mental health issues (Kuik, 2019, para. 2-4). From a physical health perspective, Stanford Medicine (2009) reports that, of the estimated 30 million child athletes in the United States, 3.5 million suffer from injuries, with 775, 000 of them leading to hospital visits annually. Mental and physical health play a large part in the potential and success of a young athlete; it may hinder their involvement, focus, effort, and abilities. Lastly, as of 2016, only 36.9% of children aged 6-12 played team sports which is down from 38.6% in 2015 and 44.5% in 2011 (Solomon, 2017). A decline in youth sport participation impacts one's potential because there is less competition, slower growth at the youth levels and, most importantly, children with potential that quit playing the sport they may have once loved. A lack

of motivation, battles with mental health and injuries, as well as a decline in sports participation contribute to young athletes failing to reach their full potential.

Background and Need

Youth sports have been around for a very long time. Millions of children across the world play sports on a daily basis in both organized and unorganized events. However, over the years, the focus of many in youth sport has changed. What once used to be a fun activity is now a gateway to becoming a professional athlete so that these children may become breadwinners for their families (Brunt, 2017). For instance, from 1920-1970, professional baseball players earned 3.4 times the national average income. By 2015, they earned 78 times more than the national average income (Brunt, 2017). A 2015 NPR survey conducted by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and Harvard University's T.H Chan School of Public Health, showed a correlation between socioeconomic status and parental hope for professional sports. 9% of parents with college degrees say they want their children to become pro athletes while 44% of parents with less than a high school degree hope for the same (Brunt, 2017). Per Brunt's findings, parents, especially those that are less educated, want their children to become professional athletes causing more children to be forced into playing sports. This parental motivation affects the youth athletics landscape as competition and training becomes more dangerous and rigorous, which can contribute to a lack of motivation and direction, poor mental and or physical health, and eventually a decrease in sport participation. By researching the youth athletics industry, one can combat these issues.

The Purpose for this Research

The purpose of this study is to determine the main reasons as to why young athletes fail to reach their full potential and what solutions are available to help them achieve their dreams of becoming a professional athlete. There is a need for this study because many who are involved in the athletics industry such as coaches, athletes, and parents, want the teams and athletes to succeed in some capacity. There are various studies that show a decline in participation, among many other negative factors, it is important to know what can be done to resolve the issues so that more children can begin to enjoy what they are doing and to succeed. Yet, there are many recommendations from industry professionals highlighted in this study that these individuals can apply to their sport environments to improve upon achieving their goals and supporting athletes.

Research Questions

With how complex the sports industry is, there are multiple questions that must be answered to generate solutions. There are so many moving parts as any sport involves business, health, and participation etc. The overarching question is:

- What are the main factors that impact a young athlete's potential?
- Furthermore, how can these factors be minimized so that they may be successful?

There are many factors mentioned previously, but other questions can be drawn from the data.

- For instance, what causes these factors and what are some strategies to resolve them before they become an issue?

By outlining the factors that may impact a young athlete's potential and developing strategies to resolve them, they will have a better chance to become successful.

Definitions

Child Prodigy	children who are considered capable of performing at a level similar to adults in their field (Feldman and Morelock, 2011, pp. 261-265).
National Collegiate Athletic Association	the governing body for Division I, II, and III college athletics in the United States (NCAA, 2022).
Sport Specialization	intense, year-round training in a single sport with the exclusion of other sports (Jayanthi et al., 2011).
Doping	when athletes use performance enhancing drugs to gain a competitive advantage (Moston and Engelberg, 2014).
Tommy John Surgery (Ulnar Collateral Ligament Reconstruction)	a surgery used to repair a torn ulnar collateral ligament in the elbow. The objective of the operation is to eliminate or reduce pain and to stabilize the elbow while restoring the elbow's range of motion. It is commonly called Tommy John surgery as the first person to receive the surgery was Major League Baseball pitcher Tommy John in 1974 (Johns Hopkins Medicine, 2019).
SMART Goals	an abbreviation for goal setting. SMART goals are Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, and Timely (Boogaard, 2021).
Likert Scale	a five (or seven) point survey scale used to let the user describe their level of agreement with a statement (McLeod, 2019).
Temporal Distance	the extent to which imagined future events or recalled past events deviate from the present in time (Bar-Anan et al., 2006).

Limitations

The notable limitation of the study is that there is no primary research. The secondary data, although quite helpful, does not provide a firsthand account of athletic potential. The opportunity to study the performance of collegiate athletes over the course of a season may have provided important information. However, difficulty in obtaining participants made obtaining primary data difficult.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

There are millions of children who participate in youth sport. Many have no end goal in sight, but for others, their goal is to become a professional athlete. Their motivations vary as some may be forced to make that happen while others have a real desire for it. Regardless, the odds of becoming a professional athlete are extremely low. Only 2% of NCAA student-athletes reach the professional ranks (NCAA, 2014). There is a lot that goes into getting an athlete to reach their full potential and a plethora of factors that influence it. It is important to identify these factors so that solutions can be developed and utilized.

This literature review outlines three factors that may impact a young athlete's potential. The first section explores research associated with a lack of motivation and direction in young athletes. The second section addresses research regarding mental and physical health and how it impacts an athlete's potential and performance. Finally, the third section focuses on the decrease in youth sport participation.

Literature Review

Lack of Motivation and Direction

Success, in any part of life, requires belief in oneself, confidence, goals, drive, willingness to work, and effort. If a young athlete lacks in these areas, then reaching their full potential is nearly impossible. This is the case because goals give individuals a sense of direction, allowing them to formulate a plan. With no set goals, people become lost. To explore the most ideal way to set goals, a study comparing the attainment of goals in relation to its perceived difficulty and achievability was conducted (Stamatogiannakis et al., 2018). The study

consisted of 151 male and 154 female participants who were divided evenly across five different conditions based on a maintenance goal, attainment goal, and the level of difficulty. Each participant organized the goals into three categories: “GPA, personal savings, and tennis goals,” (Stamatogiannakis et al., 2018). The results of the study showed that the judgement of goal difficulty is based on the size of the goal. In other words, the less important the goal sounds, the lower the perceived difficulty (Stamatogiannakis et al., 2018).

This study provides insights into the best way to set goals so that young athletes stay motivated. Smaller, more regular goals are seen as less difficult and more attainable. Parents could help their children set daily or weekly goals so that they seem possible and relevant for young minds. Unfortunately, this study was done with adults. However, if adults consider smaller goals more attainable, then children may likely follow suit especially with parental involvement (Stamatogiannakis et al., 2018).

Another study examined the impact of achievement goals and social goals on a high school student-athlete’s persistence and effort in sport training. The study consisted of 171 student athletes (123 boys and 48 girls) from a high school in the Southern United States. The participants played football (106), softball (25), volleyball (23), and soccer (17) (Guan, 2013). The participants completed a 39-item Achievement Goal Questionnaire-Athletic Programs using a 7-point Likert scale. The goals included achievement goals, mastery goals, performance goals, performance-avoidance goals, and mastery-avoidance goals (Guan et al., 2013). For social goals, a 10-item scale was used with five items focused on relationship goals while the other five items referred to social-responsibility goals. The study found that the greatest contributors to student persistence and effort were social-responsibility goals. Furthermore, every other goal contributed

to effort with the exception of avoidance goals. Lastly, the study found correlations between achievement goals and social goals in physical education settings (Guan et al., 2013).

This study is more applicable to young athletes as it was conducted with high school student-athletes and identified specific goal-setting techniques. However, this study only pertains to high school student athletes in the Southern United States so these findings may or may not apply to children of all ages or all regions. Additionally, the study has further limitations as it only tested for one outcome variable: persistence/effort (Guan et al., 2013). Nonetheless, high school student athletes who value social responsibility may use it as a motivator to reach their goals.

A third study explores the effects of time on goal progress. The study consisted of 280 participants (54% men) who were assigned randomly to different conditions based on temporal distance and goal progress. All participants were given a scenario where their goal is to lose fifteen pounds. Half the participants were told to imagine this happening a year away representing far temporal distance with no progress. The other half were told to imagine the weight loss happening a few months away representing close temporal distance (Bullard and Manchanda, 2017). The participants with no progress said they would start their workouts soon but would not start a full year out. Conversely, participants in the 'some progress' group already imagined losing 5-10 pounds as they were told it would only take them a few months to lose the 15 pounds (Bullard and Manchanda, 2017).

This study exemplifies the idea that the motivation to achieve goals and the amount of time one must focus on them is increased when the goals are more achievable in a shorter time frame. For young athletes, setting goals that will not be attained for years is not helpful as they may struggle visualizing their goals and may ultimately lose focus or interest. Similar to the first

study, goals that are considered more attainable and timelier will certainly help them remain focused.

Mental and Physical Health

In the world of sport, if someone is unable to participate in practices and games, it indicates that others are progressing while they are not. The importance of participation is why mental and physical wellbeing are imperative in sport. Unfortunately, injuries are always prevalent. In 2020 the NCAA administered mental health survey to 24,974 collegiate student-athletes. The study asked a variety of questions pertaining to the Covid-19 Pandemic, athletic pressures, sport participation, and emotional feeling. The questions involved the use of Likert scales, rankings, and 'I have' statements (NCAA Research, 2021). Some notable findings of the survey are that many student-athletes felt less lonely and less hopeless in Fall 2020 as opposed to Spring 2020. Furthermore, the top factors affecting mental health are academic worries (43% of participants), lack of access to their sport due to the pandemic (33%), Covid-19 health concerns (31%), and financial worries (24%) (NCAA Research, 2021). Furthermore, the study found that 60% of male and 55% of female athletes indicated that they had mental health support available to them (NCAA Research, 2021).

This study, although somewhat Covid-19 centric, offers insights into the thoughts and emotions of college athletes. The Covid-19 stressors may not be as important anymore, but financial worries, the inability to play sports due to factors like injury, and academic concerns are still prevalent. This study does not explore other age groups, but it does highlight the age group of amateur athletes who are getting ready to reach the professional ranks making this information quite useful. It is also important to note how most athletes believe they have mental health resources. If someone struggles, finding help may be the hardest part of dealing with

mental health. With most athletes thinking that they have resources, there is a better chance they will use the resources to support themselves (NCAA Research, 2021).

Regarding physical injuries, the National Athletic Trainer's Association conducted a study on 892 incoming West Point Academy Cadets who played sports as a child as well as in high school (Cameron, 2019). They surveyed the participants and divided them into groups based on how long they had been sport specialized. In other words, the groups were specialized (played one sport from a young age) and non-specialized (played a variety of sports at a young age). After comparing the athletes with early specialization versus those with non-specialization, the study found that those with early specialization were 50% more likely to suffer from a lower body injury in their first year at the academy (Cameron, 2019).

This study highlights (or emphasizes) the dangers of specializing too early. These athletes will overuse the same muscle groups, which greatly increases the risk of injury. It is best for athletes to play a variety of sports when they are younger so that they may use different muscle groups, learn different games, and not get bored from over-dedication to one sport. This study is quite significant as it examines participants who are graduating from high school and going to college where the level of competition gets tougher, and the risk of injury increases (Cameron, 2019).

A third study pertaining to mental and physical health was conducted by the NCAA and focused on substance abuse. This survey consisted of 20,000 student-athletes and asked questions about the amount of consumption, the regularity of consumption, outcomes of consumption such as driving under the influence citations, and how the consumption impacted their grades. The study separated the data across the NCAA's three divisions and utilized 'I have' statements to quantity their experiences (Hainline et al., 2014). In terms of alcohol, the

study found that Division III schools had the most drinks in one sitting (More than 4 drinks: female=37.8% male=50.4%) (10+ drinks: female=3.3% male=20.4%), while Division I and II reported that 39.6% of men and 31.9% (Division I) and 36.2% of (Division II), had more than 4 drinks in one sitting. Division I reported that 2.4% of women had 10+ drinks while 15.5% of men do. Division II reported that 3.2% of women had 10+ drinks while 16.8% of men did the same (Hainline et al., 2014). When examining the frequency of alcohol consumption, a combined 16% reported struggling with a game or practice after drinking in the past year while a combined 7.1% reported feeling depressed or sad for more than 2 weeks (Hainline et al., 2014). In terms of marijuana usage, the study found that most users have a grade B for their average. Only about 5-7% of marijuana users get A grades compared to 10.5% non-users (Hainline et al., 2014).

Although substance abuse may not affect all young athletes, it does have an impact on college athletes who may be hoping to reach the professional ranks of sport. With a combined 16% of athletes struggling in their sport, it is evident that substance abuse can negatively impact their potential and performance (Hainline et al., 2014).

Decreasing Participation

If there are fewer children participating in sport, then there are fewer children with the opportunity to reach the professional level. A study conducted by the Aspen Institute, in association with the Sports and Fitness Industry Association, explored rates of participation in sport as well as coaching demographics and youth activity rates in relation to household income across the United States (Solomon, 2017). Regarding participation, the number of children playing sports is decreasing as only 36.9% of children aged 6-12 played a team sport in 2016. Comparatively, 44.5% of children aged 6-12 played a team sport in 2011. The study also found

that the only sports that saw increases in participation from 2011-2016 were gymnastics, ice hockey, and lacrosse. Lastly, the data showed that the average child played fewer than two sports due to focusing on sport specialization (Solomon, 2017).

Additionally, the study identified that youth athletics are becoming smaller and smaller. This signifies that there are fewer opportunities for athletes and fewer competitions for these athletes. The specific details about the study are quite vague, but the data includes graphs and charts that provide more detailed insights; the graphs and charts will be explored in another section.

Regarding coaching demographics, the study found that coaches are inexperienced and lack sport-specific training as well as health and safety training. The study looked at male and female coaches in organized sports and studied their level of training and income. The study found that 72% of youth coaches are male and that the vast majority (49.6%) of youth coaches are parents that earn more than $100,000 annually. Additionally, only 32% of these coaches have general safety training, 31% have sports skills and tactics training, 30% have training in concussion management, 30% have motivational training, 29% have CPR and first aid training, and 28% have training with physical conditioning (Solomon, 2017).

Based on the data noted above, coaches do not have enough training to help keep young athletes safe when participating in sports. Furthermore, most coaches are incapable of helping the young athletes learn more about the sport they play so that they may improve. Increasing the amount of training young athletes receive may be beneficial so that they are better equipped to assist the children in their sports careers and to ensure that the field of play is a safer space.

Lastly, when comparing youth activity rates in relation to household income, the study found that activity rates were down compared to other years. The study identified whether

children were active or not. A child is active if they participated in a 151+ calorie burning activity during the year (Solomon, 2017). One finding showed that 29.9% of children in the lowest income bracket ($25,000) were inactive in 2016, which surpassed other income brackets. Conversely, the most active group in 2016 was children whose parents earned $100,000 or more (Solomon, 2017).

This study shows the impact money has on the opportunities and potential children have participating in sport. If there were ways to give opportunities to as many children as possible, then inactivity rates would fall and youth sports participation rates increase.

Chapter Three: Methods

Introduction

Data elements have been analyzed to assist in outlining the effects of a lack of motivation and direction, mental and physical health, and decreasing participation on a young athlete's athletic potential. The findings help to answer the research questions associated with this thesis as they pertain to discovering the main factors that impact a young athlete's potential, ways to diminish the effects of such factors to help the athletes succeed and discovering what causes these issues and what strategies can be developed so that they do not become a problem. The reviewed data was derived from studies, dissertations, surveys, books, websites, and professional perspectives.

Setting

With the use of search engines such as Google, Google Scholar, the Anna Maria College Mondor-Eagan Library Database, and the NCAA Research webpages, the various studies, surveys, and data were compiled and analyzed.

Participants

There is a variety of data and research, and a variety of participants. The studies were conducted on child, high school, and collegiate athletes, along with adults, and coaches. All the studies followed proper procedures and were completely anonymous (Stamatogiannakis et al., 2018; Guan, 2013; Bullard and Manchanda, 2017; NCAA Research, 2021; Cameron, 2019; Hainline et al., 2014; Solomon, 2017).

Intervention

Some of the independent and dependent variables in the studies are the perceived difficulty of a task and the attainment of goals, the impact of achievement goals and social goals on a high school student-athlete's persistence and effort in sport training, the effects of time on goal progress, the effects of Covid-19 on a collegiate athlete's mental health, the impact of early sports specialization on overuse injuries, the effects of substance abuse on collegiate athlete wellbeing, child athlete participation from 2011 – 2016, coaching capabilities based on the level experience and training, and the amount of young athletes participating in sports based on their parents' incomes (Stamatogiannakis et al., 2018; Guan, 2013; Bullard and Manchanda, 2017; NCAA Research, 2021; Cameron, 2019; Hainline et al., 2014; Solomon, 2017).

Materials and Measurement Instruments

The studies used internal organizational surveys, questionnaires, and physical tests to obtain data. The surveys contained Likert scale questions, interviews, 'I have' statement questions, and prioritization groups to classify perceived difficulty. In terms of validity, since the data has been generalized in this thesis due to the use of mixed methods, it is difficult to see the validity of each study as their data has been summarized and applied. However, the research was conducted by organizations such as the NCAA and peer edited by doctors and industry professionals. Furthermore, as these studies were done by acceptable sources, their findings are reliable, appropriate, and applicable for this thesis (Stamatogiannakis et al., 2018; Guan, 2013; Bullard and Manchanda, 2017; NCAA Research, 2021; Cameron, 2019; Hainline et al., 2014; Solomon, 2017).

Procedure

For the goal attainment study, participants were asked to classify types of goals based on what it was and their difficulty. The study regarding the impact of goals on student-athletes' effort used a questionnaire with a Likert scale to discover the impact of the goals on the individual athlete's effort. To obtain data for the effects of time on goal achievement, participants were given a scenario and were asked to answer their outlook on the situation. The study regarding sport specialization divided the athletes into two groups based on sports activity and performed physical tests. For the two studies regarding collegiate athletes, the athletes were surveyed anonymously and answered questions pertaining to Covid-19 and substance abuse respectively. Lastly, the studies about youth athletics participation, coaching experience, and involvement based on income, surveyed parents to gain information about their child's sport involvement (Stamatogiannakis et al., 2018; Guan, 2013; Bullard and Manchanda, 2017; NCAA Research, 2021; Cameron, 2019; Hainline et al., 2014; Solomon, 2017).

Data Analysis

To analyze the data, the studies that surveyed participants created charts and graphs to compare demographics and their positions on the various questions asked. The information was utilized to draw conclusions about the effects of substance abuse, mental health, goals and effort, and participation. For the other studies involving interviews, physical tests, and classifications, the data was compared and organized. The conclusions formulated provided insights about the risk of injuries and goal attainment. This information outlined the potential causes of the various factors that may impact a young athlete and the factors themselves while also alluding to potential solutions since various weaknesses were exposed (Stamatogiannakis et al., 2018; Guan,

2013; Bullard and Manchanda, 2017; NCAA Research, 2021; Cameron, 2019; Hainline et al., 2014; Solomon, 2017).

Chapter Four: Results

Introduction

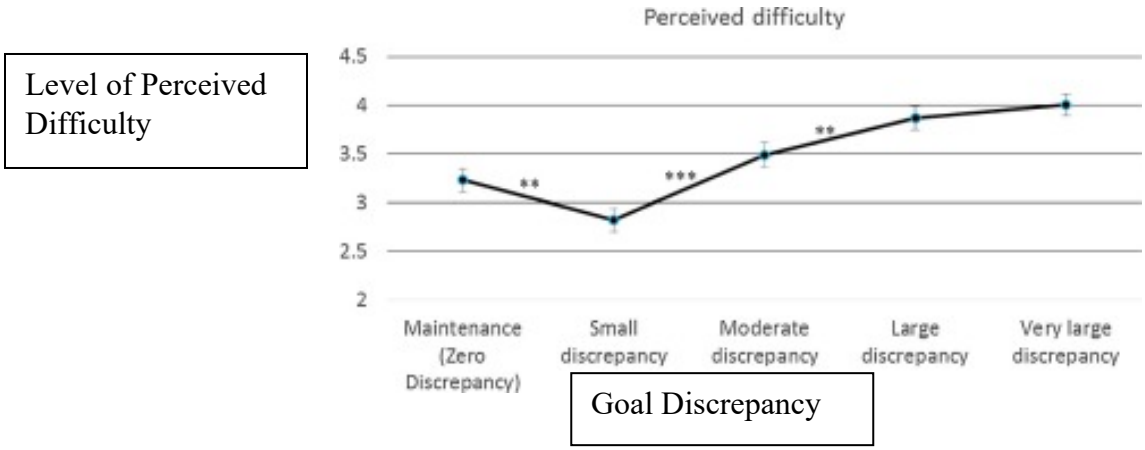
There are a variety of factors that impact the potential of a young athlete including a lack of motivation and direction, mental and physical well-being, and decreasing participation in youth sports. A variety of research was reviewed and analyzed so that conclusions could be drawn to create solutions and mitigate the effects of such factors. This data helps answer the questions: what are the main factors that impact a young athlete's potential? Furthermore, how can these factors be minimized so that they may be successful? There are many factors mentioned previously, but other questions can be drawn from the data. For instance, what causes these factors and what are some strategies to resolve them before they become an issue?

Lack of Motivation and Direction

Research regarding a lack of motivation and direction in young athletes outlines the issues associated with goal setting and goal achievement. However, these findings also provide recommendations so that young athletes can begin to set goals, plan better, and achieve such goals.

A study to determine the perceived difficulty of goals was conducted on 151 men and 154 women. The participants were tasked with organizing various goals into categories based on the difference in perceived difficulties (Stamatogiannakis et al., 2018). The figure below outlines the perceived difficulties between maintenance and attainment goals based the perceived difficulties set in the study.

Figure 1: Perceived Difficulty



The maintenance goal is designed to be a base goal that someone would do regularly. The discrepancies add to the maintenance goal to make them attainment goals (Stamatogiannakis et al., 2018). The maintenance goal has a higher perceived difficulty than the small discrepancy because their study found that small attainment goals are easier to get motivated for and complete than the average task (Stamatogiannakis et al., 2018). However, as the discrepancy in the goal increased, the perceived difficulty did as well. These findings imply that the larger a goal is, the harder it seems to achieve it (Stamatogiannakis et al., 2018). With larger goals appearing more difficult, it is best for parents, coaches, and role models in a young athlete's life to help guide the children to set SMART goals so that they may create a step-by-step plan full of small, achievable goals. This will allow the child to see their progress and complete small tasks with ease (Gould, 2020).

The figure below shows the mean results and correlations of a 39-item Achievement Goal Questionnaire-Athletic Programs use to track persistence and effort in athletes. This questionnaire was completed by high school student-athletes from the Southern United States that played various sports (Guan et al., 2013). The study involved achievement goals, mastery

goals, performance goals, performance-avoidance goals, and mastery-avoidance goals while; there were also questions about social-responsibility goals and relationship goals. The results found that the greatest contributors to effort were social-responsibility goals. However, every other goal contributed to effort besides the two avoidance goals (Guan et al., 2013).

Figure 2: Means, Standard Deviations, Beta Weights, and Correlations among Achievement Goals and Social Goals for the Overall Samples

Means, Standard Deviations, Beta Weights, and Correlations among Achievement Goals and Social Goals for the Overall Samples

Variables	M	*SD*	β	*t value*	*p*	Correlations 1	2	3	4	5	6
Outcome Variable											
1. Persistence/Effort	6.044	.919									
Predictor Variables											
1. Performance-Approach	6.277	.816	.182	2.938	.004	—					
2. Mastery-Approach	6.476	.817	.222	2.881	.004	.628**	—				
3. Performance-Avoidance	6.010	1.113	.081	1.575	.117	.375**	.339**	—			
4. Mastery-Avoidance	4.858	1.673	.040	.818	.414	.199**	.208**	.215**	—		
5. Social Responsibility	6.159	.823	.438	6.131	.001	.501**	.734**	.304**	.169**	—	
6. Social Relationship	5.912	.856	.044	.870	.385	.242**	.258**	.145**	.204**	.361**	—

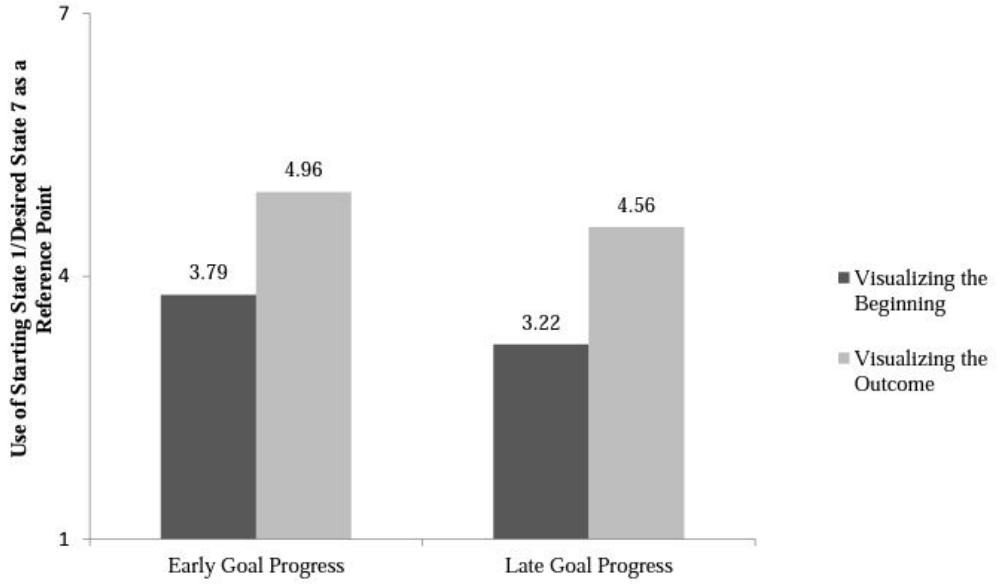
** $p < .01$

Per Figure 2, when looking at the correlations section of the chart, of all the values from 1-6 on the x-axis, the largest correlation between a goal and effort can be found in the second column of correlations for social responsibility. There is a positive correlation of .734 between social-responsibility goals and effort (Guan et al., 2013). Furthermore, categories such as mastery-approach have positive correlations (.628) on effort meaning that such goals effect one's effort (Guan et al., 2013). These findings suggest that it is best for young athletes to set goals that are focused on improving their skills and having some sort of social responsibility such as doing

community outreach, relationship building, and personal development to become a more well-rounded individual (Guan et al., 2013). Moreover, for young athletes to set goals effectively, they must not set goals that are focused on variables that are beyond their control. For example, if a young athlete has a goal for their team to go undefeated in their season that is not a good goal to have as there are too many variables that go into having an undefeated season ("4 Goals," 2018). As the findings in the study and the example suggest, it is best for young athletes to set goals focused on self-improvement through skill mastery and social responsibility.

To examine the effects of time on goal progress, a study was performed on 280 participants. The participants were told to imagine losing 15 pounds. One group was told that the weight loss would happen a year away with no previous progress representing a long time while the other group was told to imagine losing the weight within a few months while having made some progress to represent a short time. Ultimately, the study found that the participants in the long-period group said they would not begin exercising immediately while the other group believed that they had already begun exercising and had lost 5-10 pounds (Bullard and Manchanda, 2017). The chart below outlines the visualization of the participants' goals.

Figure 3:The effects of goal progress and visualization of the beginning or the outcome of goal pursuit on reference points and regulatory focus



As one may see, when it comes to the visualization of both beginning and completing the weight loss, the early progress/short period group scored higher than the late progress/long period group. These findings lead to the conclusion that goals are more likely to be completed if the deadline for achieving them is set soon. If a goal is set too far into the future, as the study found, it becomes more difficult to visualize the beginning and end of the goal (Bullard and Manchanda, 2017). When applying this knowledge for young athletes, it is important for them to set SMART goals focused on small, incremental improvements over time; having one large goal that is set too far in advance causes the goal to become unrealistic. (Gould, 2020; “4 Goals,” 2018).

Summary

When exploring why young athletes may struggle with a lack of motivation and direction, one finds that poor goal setting is a leading cause as having goals that are too large and difficult to achieve make it harder for young athletes to maintain their focus on achieving the goal. The best way for young athletes to stay focused is to set detailed SMART goals focused on incremental improvement and self-improvement (Gould, 2020; Guan et al., 2013; "4 Goals," 2018).

Mental and Physical Health

The findings pertaining to mental and physical health offer insights that are invaluable when exploring how to best support athletes and reduce the risk of injury. NCAA surveys and other research outlines the effects of mental health, substance abuse, and overuse injuries.

In terms of mental health, the NCAA conducted a 24,974 student-athlete survey in Fall 2020. They investigated various mental health concerns and concerns based on race and ethnicity during the Covid-19 pandemic as participation impacts mental health (NCAA Research, 2021).

Figure 4: Mental Health Concerns During Covid-19 Pandemic

Mental Health Concerns During COVID-19 Pandemic
(Percent of Participants Who Endorsed "Constantly" or "Most Every Day")

	Men's Sports		Women's Sports	
	Spring	Fall	Spring	Fall
Felt overwhelmed by all you had to do	31%	27%	50%	51%
Experienced sleep difficulties	31%	18%	42%	28%
Felt mentally exhausted	26%	21%	39%	39%
Felt very lonely	22%	12%	33%	21%
Felt a sense of loss	21%	8%	31%	13%
Felt sad	17%	11%	31%	22%
Felt overwhelming anxiety	14%	11%	27%	29%
Felt overwhelming anger	11%	6%	11%	8%
Felt things were hopeless	11%	10%	16%	16%
Felt so depressed it was difficult to function	7%	5%	9%	9%

Green indicates a decrease of 5 percentage points or more from Spring 2020 survey

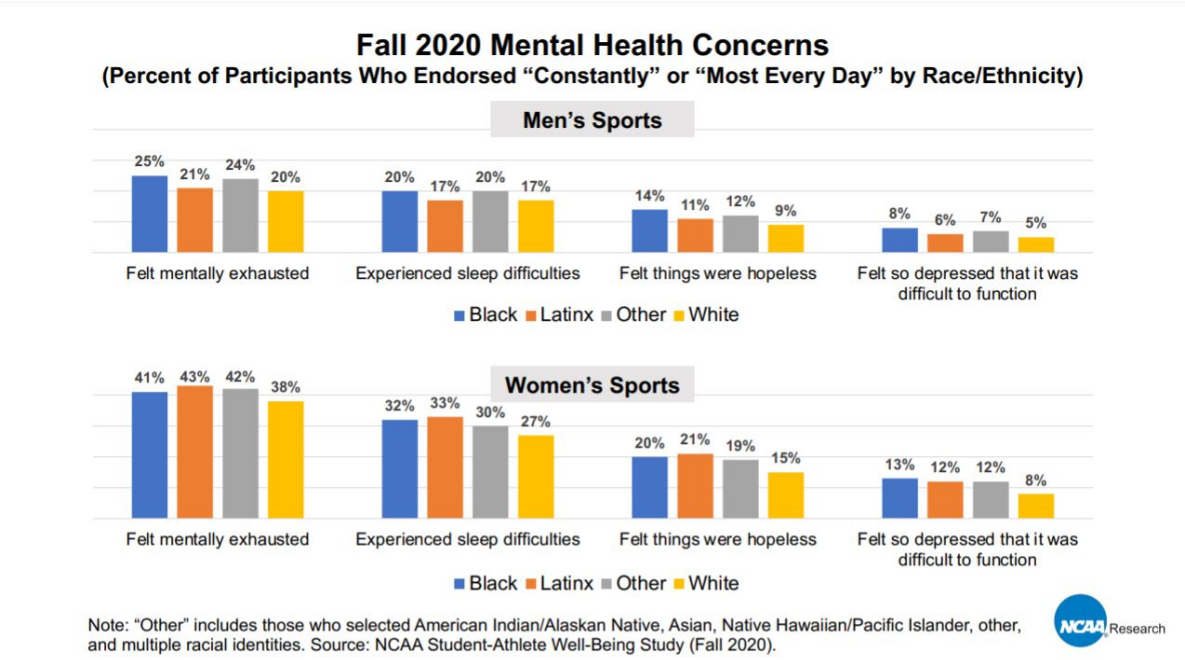
Sources: NCAA Student-Athlete Well-Being Studies (Spring and Fall 2020).

NCAA Research

Figure 4 above compares mental health concerns in 2020 in the Spring, when the pandemic began, and in the Fall when most campuses were reopened. Despite the Covid-19-centric nature of the study, it is still positive to see that, in many areas, student-athlete mental health is improved when they are on campus playing sports. The green boxes indicate a 5% increase from the Spring 2020 survey. In 6 categories for men and 4 categories for women, mental health improved when student-athletes were on campus and playing sports (NCAA Research 2021). Although not every category saw improvements, many did which exemplifies the importance of participation and involvement in sports (NCAA Research, 2021). Of course, sports may bring their own stressors, but they also allow for many athletes to get away from other things effecting their mental health.

Specific to race, as mentioned above, the survey compared mental health concern by race as well. The race comparisons help outline what populations of student-athletes feel the effects of mental health the most.

Figure 5: Fall 2020 Mental Health Concerns



In every category, black, Latinx, or other races experience the most mental health concerns. That is not to discount the concerns what white student-athletes face, but it is notable that student-athletes of the other ethnicity groups experience the effects the most. The most alarming statistic is that around 40% of female student-athletes reported feeling mentally exhausted. There are other alarming concerns such as depression causing difficulties in functioning. However, with just under half of all female student-athletes feeling mentally exhausted, it possibly indicates that athletes may be getting overworked and are expected to balance too many things all at once (NCAA Research, 2021).

Similar to mental health concerns, the NCAA conducted a 20,000 student-athlete survey exploring the effects of substance abuse on student-athletes. The survey investigated the amount of alcohol consumption in one sitting, the effects alcohol had on student-athlete behavior, and the grades of student-athletes that smoke marijuana (Hainline et al., 2014).

Figure 6: When you drink alcohol, typically how many drinks do you have in one sitting?

Female Student-Athletes

	Division I	**Division II**	**Division III**
More than 4 drinks	31.9%	32.6%	37.8%
10+ drinks	2.4%	3.2%	3.3%

Male student-athletes

	Division I	**Division II**	**Division III**
More than 5 drinks	39.6%	39.6%	50.4%
10+ drinks	15.5%	16.8%	20.4%

For both male and female student-athletes, those in Division III do the most drinking as almost 40% of the females and 50% of the males having more than 4 and 5 drinks in one sitting respectively. However, across all three divisions, in-one sitting over 30% of student-athletes have more than 4 and 5 drinks in a night regardless of gender. Of all the data, the most alarming statistic is the percentage of student-athletes that have 10+ drinks in a night; 20.4% of male Division III student-athletes have 10+ drinks one sitting (Hainline et al., 2014). That amount of consumption certainly comes with a variety of side effects and implies that binge-drinking is a problem for collegiate student-athletes that can negatively impact one's mental health.

In terms of the behavioral effects of alcohol consumption, the survey asked the participants to declare if they have experienced any of the effects of drinking that are listed off in the chart below.

Figure 7: Student-athlete drinking behavior — During the past 12 months

	Never	Once	Twice	3-5 times	6-9 times	10+ times
Had a hangover	36.7%	14.3%	11.5%	14.8%	7.4%	15.3%
Performed poorly on a test or important project	83.3%	6.9%	4.3%	3.3%	1.1%	1.1%
Been in trouble with police or other college authorities	91.0%	6.7%	1.5%	.6%	.1%	.2%
Damaged property, pulled fire alarm, etc.	92.9%	3.2%	1.8%	1.2%	.3%	.5%
Gotten into an argument/fight	77.0%	9.6%	6.2%	4.5%	1.2%	1.5%
Gotten nauseated or vomited	48.5%	19.8%	13.0%	11.7%	3.7%	3.3%
Driven a car while under the influence	86.3%	5.5%	3.5%	2.4%	.8%	1.5%
Missed a class	73.9%	7.9%	6.7%	6.7%	2.0%	2.7%
Performed poorly in practice or game	84.0%	6.6%	4.3%	3.2%	.9%	1.0%
Have showed up late or missed practice or game	94.3%	3.0%	1.4%	.8%	.2%	.3%
Been criticized by someone you know	74.6%	9.8%	6.6%	5.1%	1.5%	2.4%
Thought you might have a drinking or drug problem	94.4%	2.5%	1.2%	.8%	.4%	.7%
Had a memory loss	70.0%	10.4%	7.0%	6.4%	2.9%	3.3%
Done something you later regretted	68.0%	12.0%	8.0%	6.6%	2.3%	3.1%
Been arrested for DWI/DUI	99.0%	.7%	.1%	.1%	.0%	.1%
Tried unsuccessfully to stop using	96.7%	1.6%	.7%	.5%	.2%	.3%
Had feelings of depression, feeling sad for two weeks or longer	92.9%	3.7%	1.6%	.9%	.3%	.6%
Been hurt or injured	87.7%	6.0%	3.5%	1.9%	.3%	.5%

Most student-athletes were in the ‘never’ category for all the topics. However, drinking lead to criticisms, poor performances, danger to themselves and others, and so many other things. Alcohol, evidently, negatively effects behavior, even if only slightly, which can impact one’s mental health, physical health, and performance both athletically and academically (Hainline et al., 2014).

When looking at the effects of marijuana on student-athlete academic performance, the survey compared grades to the usage of marijuana. Those who did not use it at all or rarely used it performed the best.

Figure 8: Student-athlete marijuana and grades

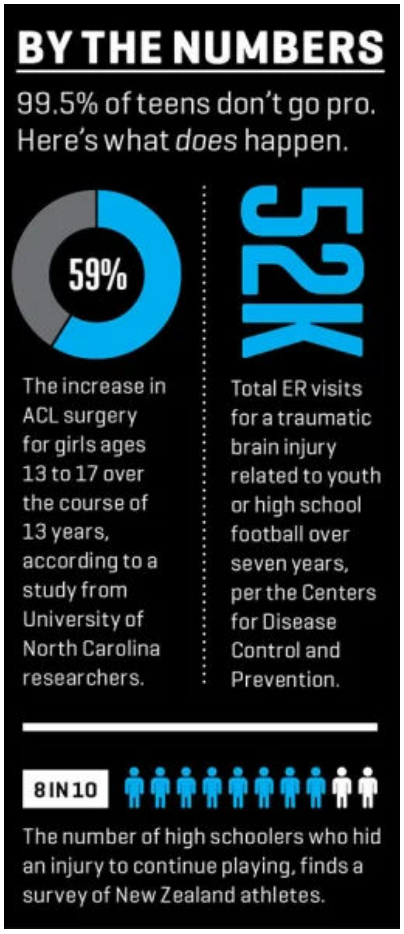
	Never used	Used in last 30 days	Used in last 12 months	Used, but not in last 12 months
A (3.84 - 4.00)	10.5%	5.2%	5.8%	6.7%
A- (3.50 - 3.83)	19.8%	14.6%	16.1%	17.0%
B+ (3.17 - 3.49)	23.3%	20.7%	24.9%	23.0%
B (2.84 - 3.16)	21.4%	23.9%	23.2%	25.2%
B- (2.50 - 2.83)	13.5%	16.9%	15.3%	14.7%
C+ (2.17 - 2.49)	7.7%	11.8%	10.1%	9.1%
C (1.84 - 2.16)	2.9%	4.4%	3.6%	3.1%
C- (1.50 - 1.83)	.6%	1.5%	.8%	.9%
D or below (< 1.50)	.3%	1.0%	.2%	.3%

The average grade is a B. However, a B grade tends to be the average regardless of smoking habits. The most notable data comes from the 'used in last 30 days' section. Participants in that section had the highest percentage of individuals with a B- or worse. Conversely, those who never used marijuana or have not used it in the last 12 months had the most individuals with a B+ or better (Hainline et al., 2014). Based on the data, it is evident that smoking threatens academic performance. The same may apply to athletic performance. However, marijuana usage impacts athletic performance anyways as it is banned in the NCAA and if a student-athlete has poor grades they may lose their athletic eligibility (Hainline et al., 2014).

From the standpoint of physical health, the largest impact sports have on one's body are injuries. For young athletes, over-use injuries are of concern as children who are specialized in one sport use the same muscle groups consistently. A study done by the National Athletics Trainer's Association compared 892 West Point Cadets and their athletic history. The study found that the cadets who were specialized in a sport were 50% more likely to suffer from a lower-body injury compared to other cadets (Cameron, 2019). Additionally, 29.3% of male and 62% of female NCAA Division I student-athletes suffered from overuse injuries (Billitz, 2021).

The effects of overuse injuries are so great that some doctors are urging parents to think about their child's talent level and if they have a chance at becoming a professional athlete. Doctors then advise them to pull out of sports if they believe they do not have the potential. Doctors are asking parents to consider this because the effects of sports specialization are so great that some chiropractors report treating 11-year-olds for injuries that 40-year-olds would normally experience (Freedman, 2019). Moreover, an applied example of an overuse injury occurs when a baseball pitcher requires "Tommy John Surgery". The number of surgeries performed on young pitchers is up sixfold since the 1990s (Freedman, 2019). The increase in surgeries and risk of injury as well as the number of injuries caused by overuse is alarming as it can have lasting effects on a young athlete's potential, performance, and quality of life.

Figure 9: By the Numbers



In other chapters, it has been mentioned that most collegiate athletes do not become professional athletes. However, in terms of teens, 0.5% of them become professional athletes and the figure above outlines the injury risks that these athletes may face. For instance, there is a 59% increase in the risk requiring ACL surgery, 52,000 Emergency room visits for brain injuries suffered while playing football, and 80% of high school student-athletes would rather hide their injury and play through it than sit out to recover (Freedman, 2019). With the risk of injury being so high, young athletes, parents, and coaches must find ways to prioritize safety in a competitive fashion or stop playing sports to avoid harm altogether as the risk of injury will always be prevalent in sports.

Summary

Mental health concerns, substance abuse, and injury risk play a role in the potential and performance of athletes. All collegiate student-athletes have some struggles associated with mental health but those in various minority groups tend to struggle the most while the consumption of alcohol and marijuana impacts grades and behaviors of collegiate student-athletes (NCAA Research, 2021; Hainline et al., 2014). Injury can impact the performance and potential of athletes in all age groups and the most concerning of which are overuse injuries caused by sports specialization as they will continue to affect that athlete as long as they are involved in that sport.

Decreasing Participation

When exploring the data associated with participation in youth athletics, one finds that there are fewer children playing sports, most coaches lack the training and expertise to coach effectively, and parental income impacts youth sports participation.

Regarding participation rates in youth sports, the Aspen Institute found that, from 2011 to 2016, youth sport participation rates were in decline. Rates for individual sports, and children participating in both team and individual sports were less than they were in 2011. The only area that saw marginal increases was team sports (Solomon, 2017)

Figure 10: Total Sport Participation Rates

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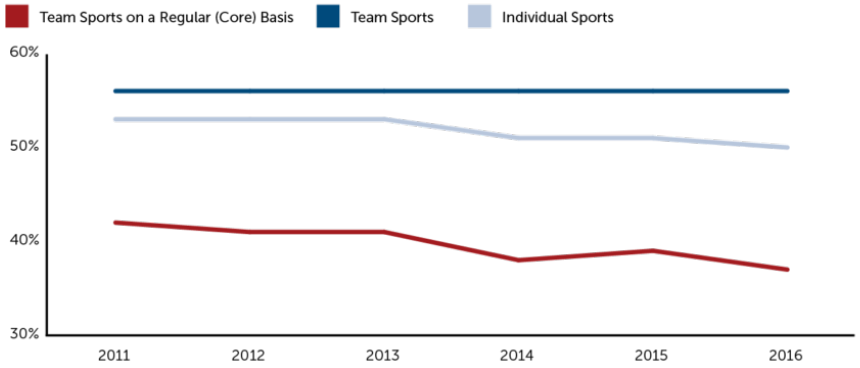
SCOREBOARD

All data below provided by the Sports & Fitness Industry Association and Sports Marketing Surveys at the request of The Aspen Institute

TOTAL SPORT PARTICIPATION RATES

Percentage of children ages 6-12 who played in 2016



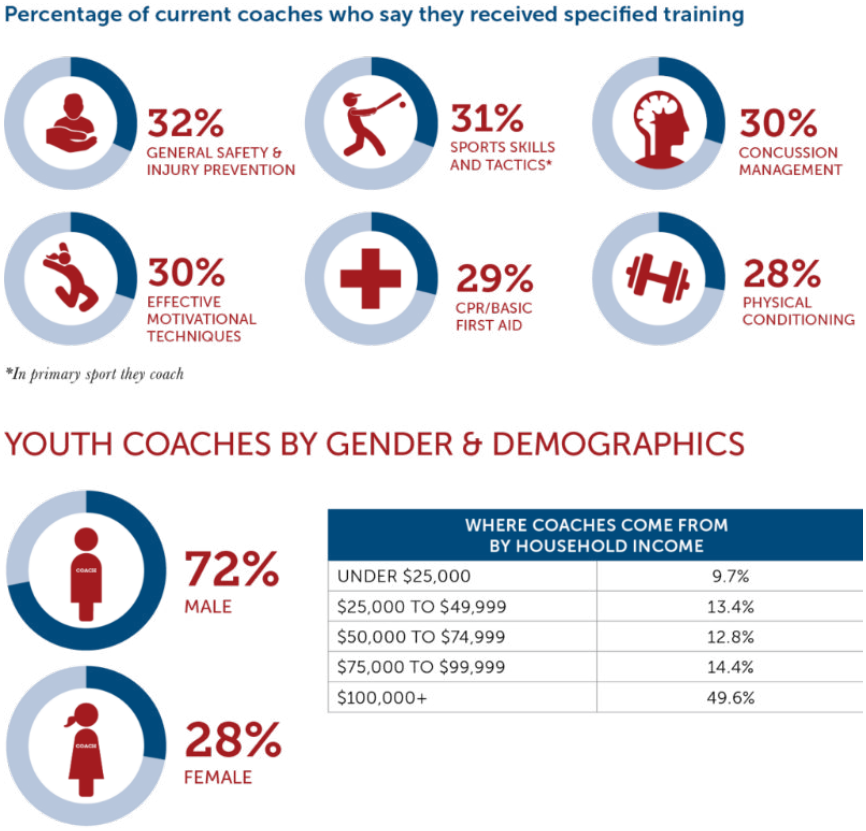
	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
TEAM SPORTS	55.5%	55.8%	55.5%	56.2%	56.1%	56.3%
TEAM SPORTS ON REGULAR ("CORE") BASIS	41.5%	41.4%	41.0%	38.2%	38.6%	36.9%
INDIVIDUAL SPORTS	53.2%	52.9%	52.7%	50.8%	50.8%	49.8%
TEAM OR INDIVIDUAL SPORTS	73.0%	72.9%	72.8%	71.5%	71.7%	71.5%

Out of the groups researched in this survey, only team sports saw an increase in participation from 2011 to 2016 which was only 0.8%. The largest change in participation rates is for the group of children who play team sports on a regular basis. From 2011 to 2016, there is a decrease in participation of 4.6% (Solomon, 2017). Based on these findings, one may argue that, at least for team sports, there are still children getting active. However, that section pertains to team sports in general. The more notable grouping is the team sports on a regular basis as those children are involved in organized sports. They would be the athletes looking to reach the professional ranks

of sport. With fewer children participating in organized sports, the less competition, and potential prospects there may be.

In terms of the quality and expertise of coaches in youth sports, the Aspen Institute find that coaches in youth athletics are not experienced in the field, lack safety training, and mostly men who make over $100,000 per year (Solomon, 2017).

Figure 11: Youth Coaches by Gender & Demographics

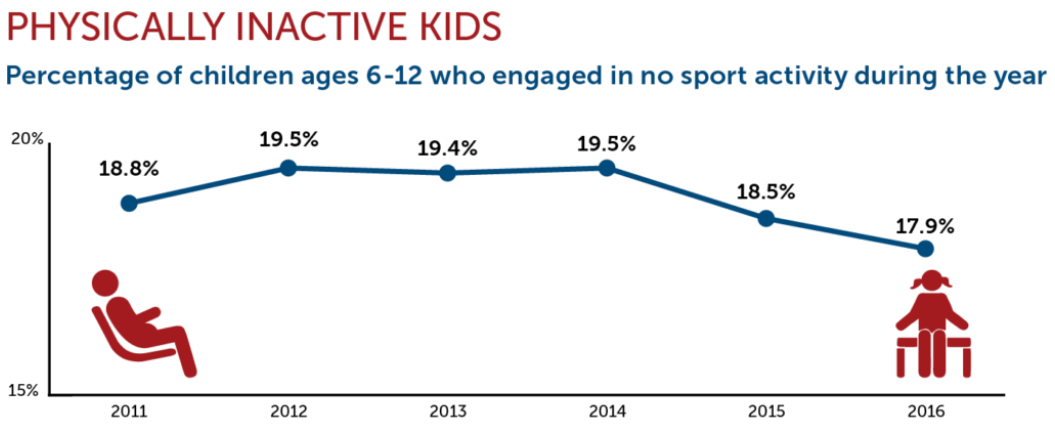


32% of coaches or less have training is safety and injury prevention, sports skills, concussion management, motivational techniques, first aid, and physical conditioning (Solomon, 2017). In the youth sports area, where safety, development, and learning are the main goals, having coaches who lack the necessary experience to do their jobs effectively impacts the athletes as they are not getting the proper support that they require. This may contribute to a decrease in participation as parents of the athletes and the children themselves become

dissatisfied with their coach and decide to quit sports altogether. Furthermore, there is a lack of representation in youth athletics coaching. It is a male-dominated space as 72% of youth coaches are men. Moreover, almost 50% of coaches make $100,000+ every year (Solomon, 2017). This lack of diversity in coaching could lead to players feeling out of touch with their coaches as girls and men may struggle to relate to each other. Some coaches may have the same performance expectations for all the children on the team, but some children have situations at home that the coaches may not be able to understand or even be aware of because they have a higher income than the parents of the children.

While individuals with higher incomes dominate the coaching space, the same applies to the activity rates of children who come from affluent families. When looking at the rate of inactivity in youth, there has been and an average decrease in activity. However, inactivity rates for children with less household incomes are more inactive while children from households with higher incomes are less inactive.

Figure 12: Physically Inactive Kids



	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
AVERAGE	18.8%	19.5%	19.4%	19.5%	18.5%	17.9%
BY HOUSEHOLD INCOME						
UNDER $25,000	29.5%	27.9%	26.4%	28.0%	28.1%	29.9%
$25,000 TO $49,999	23.8%	23.1%	23.5%	23.1%	24.3%	24.9%
$50,000 TO $74,999	16.4%	16.7%	17.4%	20.2%	19.1%	20.0%
$75,000 TO $99,999	13.5%	14.7%	16.1%	16.2%	16.0%	16.1%
$100,000+	10.1%	11.4%	12.5%	13.3%	12.2%	11.5%

It is positive to see that the average inactivity rates for children aged 6-12 are 0.9% less in 2016 than it was in 2011. However, when exploring the statistics specific to each household income grouping, one finds that there is a vast difference in inactivity between income groups. In all specific groups, inactivity is higher in 2017 than in 2011, but the most important observation is found when comparing income groups (Solomon, 2017). As the household income increases, the rate of inactivity decreases. Specific to 2016, each group is approximately 5% more active for every increase in income. The most notable statistic is the gap between household incomes under $25,000 and incomes of $100,000 or more. The difference in rates of inactivity is 18.4% meaning that almost 20% of children are more active than those from the least affluent group (Solomon, 2017). These findings imply that sports are not very accessible to children who do not come from wealthier families. All children should have the opportunity to play sports and be active in some capacity as work ethic and talent are not produced by money alone.

Summary

From 2011 to 2016, the rates of participation in youth sports were in decline. The largest decline pertained to those who played team sports on a regular basis. Coaching in the youth athletics industry is poor as around only 30% of coaches have safety and skills training. Furthermore, over 70% of youth athletics coaches are men while approximately 50% of coaches make $100,000 or more leading to a lack of representation in youth sports coaching. Lastly, inactivity rates in children have fallen on average since 2011, but the disparity in inactivity rates between household income groups spans almost 20% (Solomon, 2017). For young athletes to reach their full potential, they need the opportunity to play supports and receive the proper guidance from their coach.

Chapter Five: Discussion

Introduction

There are multiple factors that affect a young athlete's potential when it comes to becoming a professional athlete. In this thesis, the factors researched were: a lack of motivation and direction, mental and physical health, and decreasing participation in youth athletics. This thesis reviewed various studies relating to goal attainment, student-athlete mental health, studies regarding overuse injuries, young athlete participation, and coaching in youth athletics. Such research helps outline how each factor impacts young athletes as poor goal setting may negatively impact confidence, mental illness and physical injury may lead an athlete to not be able to compete in their sport, and fewer children playing sports means there is a smaller talent pool and weaker competition.

Discussion

Lack of Motivation and Direction

Three studies related to perceived difficulty, the effects of time on goal achievement, and student-athlete effort and performance were researched to determine how they impact young athletes. In terms of perceived difficulty, the study had participants classify various goals based on difficulty and found that smaller goals are considered less difficult and easier to achieve (Stamatogiannakis et al., 2018). A study exploring how time impacts goal achievement was conducted by having two groups of participants imagining losing 15 pounds. One group was told that they would lose the weight in a year, while the other group was told they would lose the weight in a few months. The study found that those who imagined losing the weight in a few

months imagined already losing some weight, while the other group said they would not start their exercise yet. The study concluded that goals with a closer deadline are more likely to be completed (Bullard & Manchanda, 2017). A study researching student-athletes effort and performance surveyed high school student-athletes about various goals. The study found that social responsibility goals had the most positive impact on their effort (Guan et al., 2013).

Mental and Physical Health

Two NCAA surveys regarding mental health and substance abuse and a West Point study about overuse injuries were researched to gain insights into the effects of mental and physical health on young athletes. An NCAA mental wellness survey was completed by over 24,974 student-athletes. The study's most notable findings were that mental health improved from the Spring of 2020 to the Fall of 2020 as student-athletes were allowed to be back on campus playing sports again after the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic. Minority groups were found to have more mental health challenges than white student-athletes (NCAA Research, 2021). An NCAA Substance Abuse survey was completed by 20,000 student-athlete, which found that alcohol and marijuana can impact a student-athlete's performance and behavior (Hainline et al., 2014). A study examining incoming West Point cadets was done to compare their athletic histories. The study found that the cadets who were sport-specialized were at increased risk of overuse injuries compared to the other cadets with fewer sports specialization (Cameron, 2019).

Decreasing Participation

The Aspen Institute conducted studies about participation and coaching skills in youth athletics. From 2011-2017, the study found that fewer young athletes played team sports regularly. The only category that saw a small increase in participation was team sports that were not held regularly. The study found that approximately 30% of coaches had related skill

experience and health and safety training (Solomon, 2017). It was also noted that finance impacted participation levels. Children in lower household income brackets were more inactive than children from wealthier households (Solomon, 2017).

Limitations

The most notable limitation of this thesis is that no primary research was conducted. Residing on a college campus with abundant collegiate athletes may have provided helpful insights into this thesis. However, a 15-week semester with college sports seasons lasting about eight weeks negatively impacted conducting of a proper study. Furthermore, studies reviewed in this thesis had adult participants. Of course, most of them pertained to athletics, but they are not focused specifically on youth.

Recommendations for Future Research

The findings noted in this thesis indicate that studies about goal attainment specific to young athletes could be performed as the goal attainment and effects of time on goal progress were performed on adults only. Studies specific to athletic performance, injury history, and mental health in athletes younger than high school student-athletes would provide helpful information. The studies would provide insight into how youth athletics impacts athletes as they transition into high school and college sports. Conducting a study on collegiate student-athletes potential, performance, and effort through the course of a college sports season would be beneficial since it was not conducted for this thesis and would provide insight into athletic potential.

Conclusions

Three critical conclusions found in this research are that poor goal setting, mental and physical health, and decreasing participation in youth athletics can negatively impact a young athlete's potential. These factors can affect the professional sports landscape, and there are ways to help mitigate the effects of each factor. Setting goals that are too large and take too long to achieve become harder to conceptualize and concentrate on. This makes achieving goals more difficult, potentially ruining an athlete's confidence. An athlete should be supported in goal setting and set smaller, incremental SMART goals (Gould, 2020). Poor mental and physical health, as well as facing the risks associated with early sport specialization, a young athlete may struggle to compete and could face injury troubles throughout their athletic career. Athletes should utilize various muscle groups and try a variety of sports in their youth to avoid overuse. Mental health resources should be made available to all athletes, and young athletes should be supported in their endeavors. With fewer children playing sports, the talent and competition pools become smaller as fewer athletes participate in sports. The items noted above impact professional sports as young athletes are the future of every sport. It is critical for governing bodies and professional leagues to invest in youth athletics to provide every child with an opportunity to play sports as it is good for the child and increases the talent pool for every sport.

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