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Keeping Women in Sport: Positive Experiences of Six Women's Experiences Growing Up and Staying with Sport in Portugal

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Abstract: In addition to playing an important role in combating lifestyle diseases such as obesity, participation in youth sport provides opportunities to develop skills and competencies in sport and in life-long social, moral, and personal development (Light, 2008; Georgakis & Russell, 2011). In countries that have well-developed clubs, youth sports systems such as those in Australia, the UK, Canada, Germany, and Portugal attract children and young people to sports and keep them participating. It presents a challenge for government bodies with youths (particularly females) beginning to drop out of sports at the age of 13. Patterns of sport participation are different between boys and girls with the rate of female participation significantly lower than their male peers. While attention has been paid to dropout and burnout (Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2008), less attention has been paid to the reasons why girls continue involvement in sport. This study redresses this oversight in the literature by evoking the trajectories of young female athletes in sport from their first steps in sport up to their present situation as adult, competitive players. The study focuses on the experiences of six female athletes aged between 20 and 22 who participate in basketball, volleyball, and judo.

Keywords: *Sport participation, female athletes, qualitative inquiry, Portugal*

Introduction

Participation in youth sport provides an opportunity for the development of motor, personal, and social skills that can promote life competencies (Côté, Strachan, & Fraser-Thomas, 2009; Light, 2008). In addition, physical activity has been associated with health benefits and reduced risk behaviours with club sport being a significant site for participation in sport. Studies in several countries showed consistently high rates of participation of children and adolescents in organized club and school sports (Ewing & Seefeldt, 2002; McGee, Williams, Howden-Chapman, Martin, Kawachi, 2006; Adelino, Vieira, & Coelho, 2005). However, the pattern of sport participation is not the same for boys and girls with the rate of female athlete participation being significantly lower than that of their male peers. The rate of dropout among girls is also higher than with boys. With evidence showing a link between participation in youth sport and active and healthy lifestyles in adulthood, the lower participation rates of females in sport at adult ages can represent a gendered disadvantage in health and quality of life (Telama, Yang, Hirvensalo, & Raitakari, 2006).

Although there is a body of research on burnout and dropout (Gustafsson, Kenttä, Hassmén & Lundqvist, 2007; Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2008; Sarrazin & Guillet, 2001), far less attention has been paid to the reasons why young people persist in sport. With the work that has been conducted in this area (Light, Harvey, & Memmert, in press) there is little that has a specific focus on females. To become a successful athlete, high commitment and motivation are generally considered as being key factors (Gustafsson, Kenttä, Hassmén, & Lundqvist, 2007) with Vallerand (2001) arguing that the strongest influences on the athletes' perceptions of the environment and motivation are exerted inside the team, through coaches, peers, and significant others. Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model (Krebs, 2009) also suggests that the team microsystem operates as a decisive factor shaping athletes' sport experiences.

Sport can foster positive personal and social development in young people (Côté, Strachan, & Fraser-Thomas, 2009; Light, 2010a) with environment playing a crucial role in shaping their beliefs about sport through their perceptions of the practice and competition climate (Krebs, 2009). However, as Light (2008) suggests, sport must be enjoyable, have meaning, and be relevant enough to attract and keep children and young people involved long enough for positive developments to occur. If sport experiences are enjoyable for individuals, it seems reasonable to expect that participation in activity will continue for a long period.

One of the most common theoretical frameworks used to study youth sports environments is that of Achievement Goal Theory (Nichols, 1989) with literature suggesting that a task or mastery orientation correlates positively with prosocial attitudes, fun in practice, self-esteem, and persistence in sport (Roberts, 2001; Sarrazin & Guillet, 2001; Gonçalves, Coelho e Silva, Cruz, Torregrosa, & Cumming, 2010). The literature also suggests that motivational climate can be fostered by the coach (Newton, Duda, & Yin, 2000) or by peers (Vazou, Ntoumanis, & Duda, 2006) with females scoring higher in task or mastery orientations than their male peers and placing comparatively less importance upon winning (Roberts, 2001). This suggests to us that a team climate perceived as mastery-oriented might be valued by many girls as being more attractive than an environment in which stress is placed on winning.

Within the social environment that athletes train and live in over their lives in sport is the coach-athlete relationship that significantly shapes experiences of practice and the competition environment. For example, Lorimer and Jowett (2009) report that coaches' and athletes' mutual perceptions of their relationship play a key role in both developing commitment to sport and fostering satisfaction with it. Coaches of female youth teams, interviewed by Gilbert and Trudel (2004), state that girls need more attention than boys regarding the practices' organization and social environment.

In a study with adolescent girls, McDonough and Crocker (2005) suggest that personal relationships among teammates contribute toward increasing motivation to participate while also fostering sport commitment. Using the Sport Friendship Quality Questionnaire, they found that "being with friends" is important for most girls. A study on young female gymnasts (Weiss & Weiss, 2007) found significant differences by competitive level among predictors of sport commitment with personal investment and social constraints from families, friends, and coaches varying in importance according to the gymnasts' level. It seems that the athletes' commitment to sport is strongly dependent upon their perception of success in competition.

Smith, Ntoumanis, and Duda's (2007) study on British athletes found that autonomous goal motives positively predicted effort, which is linked to well-being. These findings suggest that autonomy in goal setting plays a positive role in the athletes' satisfaction with their sport and it is not reducible to goal difficulty. This sense of autonomy is strongly dependent upon the training climate fostered by coaches and peers (Vazou, Ntoumanis, & Duda, 2006). At the same time, sport and physical education literature points toward the importance of fun in engaging young people in sport and for their persistence in it (Siedentop, 2002; Smoll & Smith, 2002; Bengoechea, Streat, & Williams, 2004), but declines in importance as young people move into specializing and investment phases from around age 13 (Coté & Hay 2002; Helsen, Hodges, Van Winckel, & Starkes, 2000). It is, however, generally accepted that coaches must promote a practice environment in which young athletes can experience pleasure and fun and these seem to be of particular importance up to early adolescence.

Quantitative and qualitative approaches both have their own particular strengths for research on sport participation (Light, 2008) with Krane and Baird (2005) arguing that qualitative research designs increase the flexibility and latitude of our knowledge about sport experiences and athletes' perceptions. Furthermore, youth interactions within their social environment are not static, but instead, dynamic, complex, and evolving over time in connection with developmental characteristics. Changing perceptions, beliefs, or expectations about life and sport participation, thus, cannot be adequately understood through a single methodology.

Nonquantifiable pieces of individual experiences can be made accessible through the personal recollections of those who are the subjects of the research. In this study, we evoked the trajectories of young female athletes, starting with their first steps in sport until their present situation as competitive players. This developmental mapping (Markula & Denison, 2006) sought to collect data from the subjects' stories, order the facts chronologically, and confer a structure and a meaning to a sequence of experiences to identify common factors contributing toward their long-term participation in sport.

The main themes identified in the research emerged from the analysis of our data, interpreted with existing theoretical and empirical work reported in the literature. The factors we identify made major contributions to the participants' ongoing persistence in sport.

Methods

Participants

Six female athletes, aged 20–21, were interviewed in the study. Two of them played basketball, two played volleyball, and two participated in judo. All six were engaged in competitive sport clubs, participating in the national competitions organized by the governing body of their sport. They were also university students at the time of the study with at least 10 to 13 years of experience in their sport. Although they had extensive sport experience, they had never been selected for national or regional teams. We made an effort to target participants with a similar competitive and educational level with the assistance of the club coaches.

Data Collection

An open-ended interview format was selected as the most appropriate way to gain information about sport participation. The content of the interview matched the methodological guidelines for qualitative research (Strauss, 2003) and tried to answer the questions raised in the introduction of the study. Each participant answered the same questions, but the flow of the conversation allowed some variation in the sequence of the questions. To gain deeper information, participants could present their experiences in a flexible way. To clarify some responses, follow-up questions were addressed.

Procedures

The Ethics Committee of the researchers' university approved the study. Club coaches were first contacted to help the selection of participants. All the athletes selected gave their consent to participate in the study. The interviews took place in the clubs' facilities, in a meeting room, always before a normally scheduled practice, in the same day of the week. The athletes were interviewed in groups of two from the same team, for 45 minutes, in three consecutive weeks, for a total period of 135 minutes. All the interviews were audio recorded with portable equipment. The transcriptions were sent back to the interviewees for eventual corrections, and no one suggested modifications of their initial statements. The respondents are identified by their sport and a pseudonym (basketball, Ana and Sofia; judo, Filipa and Marta; volleyball, Joana and Maria).

Data Analysis

Collected data were transcribed verbatim and content analysis was used as a procedure to organize and code the interview data in blocks representing a common theme. We started the analysis by coding the quotes and with participants able to present their experiences in a flexible way subsequently coding emerging data. We read the transcribed interviews to identify the themes and categorize them within the hypothesized dimensions outlined in the introduction through a deductive approach (Strauss, 2003). The analysis was continued inductively grouping the remaining quotes in new dimensions and themes. The first two authors independently identified the themes and then compared and discussed the results until arriving at a consensus. An external researcher with extensive experience in content analysis validated the coding process.

Results

Sport Backgrounds

The athletes self-classified themselves as being middle-class and had started to practice sport between 7 and 10 years of age. Two of the girls started with swimming, then moved into their current sport. They engaged directly in a club, with the exception of Ana, a basketball player, who started in her school and moved to the club at the age of 13. Their actual club is the same one that they began in. Only Sofia, a basketball player, moved to another club at the age of 14, but she came back at the end of the season.

The major influences on their engagement in sport were their physical education teachers, mothers, and classmates. Their parents and siblings were not active sportspersons or sport mentors, but one of the girls, Ana, said that her mother wanted her to practice “no matter what sport” to keep her active and healthy, letting her choose her sport. Regarding family support, all the respondents declared that they felt no pressure from parents. Three of them reported their dependence on parents for transportation to and from practice until the age of 16–17, but the other three walked or used public transportation to get to practice. Sofia and Joana said that sport had no importance for their families and that their parents never came to watch practices or matches. Ana, Filipa, Marta, and Maria reported that the father or the mother watched matches, although Sofia didn’t want her parents to come to matches because “they think I’m a good player but I’m not, and I don’t want to disappoint them.”

Achievement Orientations

In regard to winning, competition level, and their evaluation of success, the athletes approached the topic from a time perspective, expressing variations in perceptions, beliefs, and opinions according to changes in group ages or competitive demands:

When I was a kid, winning or losing was more important than now. With growth, I started to value having a good or a bad game. Sometimes, for me, a lost game could be a good game. (Joana, volleyball)

Interviews with all the athletes in the study reflected a task or mastery orientation with stress on mastering aspects of game play or skills over results (Gonçalves, Coelho e Silva, Cruz, Torregrosa, & Cumming, 2010). This is evident in this quote from Filipa, a judo athlete:

Victory is important because you feel good. But sometimes I believe I had a good competition but the final result doesn’t match my expectations. With age I learned to deal with that quite well. (Filipa, judo)

When evaluating their career in terms of being on a trajectory to higher competitive levels, the athletes did not seem to attach much importance to regional or national selections, championship titles, or other explicit rewards. They had generally matured as players who know their own ability and strive for improvement but focus more on what they perceive as the performance of the team or of themselves: “I knew from the beginning that I’d never be a great player so I cared little about selections and all that stuff” (Sofia, basketball). This

maturing accompanied by a realization and acceptance of their abilities in sport did not detract from their desire to remain in competition while reflecting a notion of achievement as not always relating to winning: "Sometimes I looked at other girls and thought, 'I hope I will be as good as she is.' But later I realized exactly what I am able to do" (Marta, judo). Speaking about their evaluation of whether or not a practice session or competition was good, the six women commonly stressed effort and self-referenced perceptions: "We hope that the things we practiced during the week are going to work in games; sometimes after a game I think, 'We lost, but we couldn't do better and I enjoyed playing'" (Maria, volleyball).

The Influence of the Coach

The athletes' relationships with their coaches and the approaches taken by them had a powerful influence on the development of positive attitudes toward participation in sport.

Coach attitudes toward winning. During their career, the athletes had, at most, three coaches with only one of these coaches being a female. They reported having a coach when they were under 14 years of age, another one in their juvenile (14–16) and junior (17–19 years) years and a third coach in adulthood. Asked what they thought of the climate fostered by the coach, the athletes answered that they perceived no clear or strong orientation toward winning at all costs. When asked whether or not the coaches cared much about victory, the athletes said that this was generally not the case. They said that everybody wanted to win but that it was not the major concern of the coaches: "I think that none of my coaches gave much importance to the results" (Sofia, basketball).

The athletes felt that, particularly when younger, all their coaches had seemed to be more concerned with long-term player development and the development of team play than with results: "I think that my initial and junior coaches were more concerned with team performance and with our progress as players than with the winning record" (Maria, volleyball).

They said that the players and the coaches wanted to win and would sometimes compromise on regular practice to enhance prospects of winning but that it was not common as made clear here:

Sometimes the coach played a girl that didn't come to the practices that week, and we agreed with that because that girl could help the team to win the game, but it was not always, like a system, only in very special cases (Sofia, basketball).

They reported having had some conflict with their coaches but accepted this as being part of the relationship and tried to put these conflicts in perspective: "I didn't like all the coaches I had; sometimes our personalities clashed, but I never thought about leaving the team" (Filipa, judo).

Qualities admired in a coach. When asked about the qualities they appreciated the most in a coach two main features arose from the interviews. They all reported valuing the commitment of the coaches and how much they cared about the team, both inside and outside the gym as is indicated by the following quote: "For me, a good coach works hard and wants us to work as hard as him...it's not that coach who is always saying 'well done,' but one who wants us to do better" (Sofia, basketball). This sentiment was confirmed by Marta who said, "The best coach I had pushed himself to the limits in every practice and wanted

us to do the same physically and mentally; but he was able to make a joke and was a good companion out of the gym” (Marta, judo).

Friendship, Enjoyment, Autonomy, and Goal Setting

The women expressed different opinions about the importance of friendship, but did not tend to value the whole team as a general source of affective support. Instead, they enjoyed friendships with a few players within the team. The friendship they valued was not a team-based friendship, but rather a selection of good friends within the team and developed by training and playing together over time: “Since we were initiates, I’ve been a good friend with 2–3 girls of the team. The others, we play together but we are not really good friends” (Sofia, basketball). As was the case with their relationships with their coaches, the athletes reported often experiencing conflict with their teammates but accepted this as being perfectly normal. In their opinions, their teams have been always divided in to smaller groups of good friends that only gather for practice and competition.

When they were asked about the things they value in their sport participation, the athletes stressed liking a degree of autonomy. They enjoy the sport that they choose without pressure from others such as parents, coaches, or peers as Ana explains: “It’s something I do because I want to do it and I don’t feel compelled to go to the practice” (Ana, basketball). All six women said that the health benefits associated with participation in sport had nothing to do with their decisions made to play sport and that neither was being fit or thin ever a concern for them. Neither did they feel that being popular or being accepted by peers was a motive for persisting in sport. They did, however, enjoy a supportive and relaxed social environment where they felt valued and free of too much pressure as one of the judo players makes clear when talking about her club: “It’s a small club. We practise together, the older ones and the youngest. It’s a relaxed environment and I feel at ease with everybody” (Marta, judo).

While all six women reported liking a lack of exclusive emphasis on results and winning week in week out, they still enjoyed competition. Indeed, it was central to their enjoyment of their sport and ongoing participation in it because it gave focus to their efforts at training as a measure of progress, improvement, and learning as has been identified in studies on youth sport (Light & Curry, 2009) and is evident in this quote from Maria: “I like a healthy competition. I couldn’t practice if we didn’t have a game, a goal. I like to practise something and see if it works in a game” (Maria, volleyball).

Time Management

All six athletes unanimously stressed the importance of time management in their lives and its relationship with the quality of their sport experience as a valuable learning outcome arising from their experiences in sport. Having a lot of things to do didn’t seem to be a problem to them because they were used to being busy and able to manage time: “Sport is good because I can better organize all the things I need to do. I don’t know. If I didn’t have sport, it would be a mess” (Filipa, judo). Managing time was especially important because all six women had to deal with the pressures and demands of playing competitive sport while at school with a minimum of three practices per week plus competition and squeezing in a personal and social life. They felt that having a lot of things to do had a positive effect on them with one suggesting how important her sporting commitments were in developing good time management skills:

When I was 15, I quit basketball for several months, because my mother thought that my school marks were bad. It was my worst year at school, because I had a lot of free time and I didn't know what to do. I had to go back to practices to be able to manage my time (Sofia, basketball).

Later in their junior and adult years, the athletes spoke about growing conflict between the demands of sport and college leading to a lower commitment to their sport. As adults they felt that sooner or later they would have to drop out of competitive sport due to the demands on their time and energy created by personal affairs and professional careers. The importance they placed on sport for developing efficient time management skills and their enjoyment of being able to manage full and meaningful lifestyles was reflected in Sofia's view that she would need to find an activity of some kind to "put some order in their lives" if and when she quit competitive sport.

Discussion

The six women in the study tended to display a common pattern of sport participation, beginning before the age of 10; an engagement in a community-based club; and a fidelity to a particular sport and club for a long period of time. This provided stability, enhancing opportunity to develop a sense of belonging, community, and relationships with peers and coaches. This supports other research showing the importance of a sense of community for long-term participation in club sport (Light, 2008). The influence of family did not seem to be as significant as in some other research (Wolfenden & Holt, 2005; Ullrich-French & Smith, 2006). Parents and siblings were seen by the women as having a mixed influence yet always as being supportive. For two women, peers had a major influence on initial engagement in their sport, but to varying degrees, they all said that they were autonomous in regard to decisions made in regard to other aspects of their sport life and that this contributed toward them deciding to stay in sport. These findings agree with previous research suggesting that female perceptions of autonomy and empowerment form important factors leading to satisfaction with sport (Sarrazin & Guillet, 2001; McGee, Williams, Howden-Chapman, Martin, & Kawachi, 2006; Weiss & Weiss, 2007). In this study, the participants' need for autonomy became stronger with their growth and maturation. All of them reported their adult sport participation being completely independent from logistic or emotional support from the families.

Task-achievement orientations have been described in the literature as being positively correlated with fun, enjoyment, and satisfaction with sport and prosocial attitudes (Roberts, 2001; Gonçalves, Coelho e Silva, Cruz, Torregrosa, & Cumming, 2010). When they talked about their experiences of sport, the women stressed the lack importance given to individual or team success in terms of wins and losses and the value they, and others, placed on the quality of their play as a team and/or an individual. Research suggests a mastery-oriented motivational climate has a positive correlation with exercise involvement or more adaptive responses of young athletes (Theodosiu & Papaioannou, 2005; Smith, Balaguer, & Duda, 2006). Likewise, the athletes in this study reported little interest in sport results as the main goal of their participation while also suggesting that it was not the most important thing for their coaches. Also, the developmental perspective is evident. When they grow older, the

women accept participation in sport for reasons other than competitive success. Roberts (2001) and Duda (2001) report that ego-orientation tends to be higher in older athletes and in individual sports. Here it seems that there are no differences among sports and when they reach the junior age group (17–19), they stop worrying about competitive results. These findings show a coping attitude about sport seen as an opportunity to do things well and feeling good about effort and performance.

The perceptions of “doing well” are closely related to environment and practice climate as shaped by peers and the coach. The importance of the interaction between dispositional and situational variables has been stressed in various studies (Whitehead, Andrée & Lee, 2004; Sage & Kavussanu, 2007) indicating that outcomes are perceived as being positive by the athletes when achievement perspectives have the same meaning for them, for their families, for their coaches, and for their peers. According to the athletes’ responses this convergence of meaning between their achievement orientations and the environment is perceived as clear especially when reaching adulthood. Persistence in activity seems to represent a complex process of conciliation between personal expectations and the climate fostered by others with a progressive reduction of sources of conflict.

This underlines the importance of the social environment and of the six athletes’ long-term membership in their clubs. Mutual perceptions from coaches and athletes have a crucial role in fostering motivation for athletes to stay in sport and are linked to satisfaction with the sport (Lorimer & Jowett, 2009). Previous studies with elite and adolescent athletes (Jackson, Knapp, & Beauchamp, 2009; Fraser-Thomas & Côté, 2009) underlined the importance of that interaction and how sport experiences can be positive or negative, depending of the ecology of the practice environment. The complex relationship between coaches and athletes as a social grouping is strongly influenced by context within which the coach assumes a leading role (Fraser-Thomas & Côté, 2009).

The six athletes in this study value a coach that gives his/her best and wants his/her players to do the same. Unlike boys, who care about winning and status (Lee, Whitehead, & Balchin, 2000; Roberts, 2001), girls enjoy learning something that can be used in competition and social relationships. Although one of the athletes said she likes a coach who is friendly outside the gym, all of them seem to agree to look at the coach as being a “more capable one” (Jones & Wallace, 2006). The results lend support to the findings of Myers, Felz, Maier, Wolfe, and Reckase (2006), in a study with adult male and female athletes, where the coaches’ specific competency about game strategy was highly valued by female athletes. The common view of the coach as a friend and a mentor in sport and in life is not corroborated by the present study.

Another widely held assumption about the quality of sport experiences is that a friendly environment for young people is characterized by friendship and enjoyment (Strean & Holt, 2000; McDonough, & Crocker, 2005). The results of this study suggest that while friendship is important that friendships between players are more complex because the participants never look upon them as a simple, generalized feeling. The team is not seen as a monolithic unity but rather a constellation of groups of good friends. The study of McDonough and Crocker (2005) with adolescent female athletes didn’t point out the quality of friendship as a predictor of sport commitment. It seems that, from the beginning, the teammates are not all friends and it doesn’t bother the girls. Later, after adolescence years, the group of friends is not team centred; the athletes live their social relationships mostly outside the team. In a study with youth coaches, Gilbert and Trudel (2004) report that the female teams’ coaches

feel that it is important to pay particular attention to the out-of-gym activities to build strong cohesion and a positive motivational climate. However, this is not confirmed by this study with the women placing little importance on socializing with teammates after or outside practice and games which seems to be similar to youth boys' teams (Sirard, Pfeiffer, & Pate, 2006).

This study contradicts the research suggesting that fun and enjoyment are essential for persistence in sport per se. Bengoechea, Streat, and Williams (2004) qualify this contention by arguing that what constitutes fun and enjoyment varies between individuals and that they are strongly related to achievement orientations, perceptions of the climate, and relevant information from significant others. Once again, fun seems to be related to a good practice, a good competition, and a sense of accomplishment among the six women and across the three sports in which they were involved. As Long and Carless (2010) suggest, fun means little without skill acquisition and competence development. This contention is evident in other research on youth sport (see Light, 2010b).

This sense of accomplishment, of serious effort and things well done appears to be linked with a sense of autonomy. The athletes' answers reveal the need to be in control of their own choices and personal schedules. This perception of agency becomes stronger with age, with the athletes feeling less and less dependent upon their families. Looking retrospectively, as young adults, they all link their present satisfaction with sport to a sense of autonomy in sport when younger. These results are similar to the findings of Smith, Ntoumanis, and Duda (2007) whose study also suggested the importance of autonomy in goal setting for the athletes' satisfaction with sport independently of goal difficulty. The importance of the role the coach plays in making sport a positive experience is suggested by the participants when they refer to the importance of a relaxed environment, free of pressure and the need to have clear goals that can be monitored through competition (Vazou, Ntoumanis, & Duda, 2006).

Efficient time management also contributed toward the participants' ongoing participation. A sense of order and security seems to be crucial in the young people's lives and good time management allowed the athletes to cope with the competing demands of sport, education, and social life. Additionally, many of them felt that being forced to develop time management skills helped manage other aspects of their lives.

Conclusion

The importance of the environment oriented to a mastery approach appeared to be the most crucial factor in keeping the women in this study in their sports. This was especially important for them in the early stages of participation, when the pressure for competitive results can impede satisfaction and enjoyment. The long periods of time spent in one sport and in one club also seem to be very significant as it allowed for the development of a sense of belonging and worth, for the development of friendships with some girls or women in their teams, and for the development of relationships with their coaches. It was within these stable settings, significantly shaped by the coaches, that they developed into mature athletes who valued improvement in performance over short-term results. The team climate is most valued when it provides opportunities to learn new things, to put in effort to learn well, and to see the results of that effort. The six athletes recognized the role of the coach as being important in shaping this climate, not as a friend, but most of all as a good, committed professional who wishes to get the best out of his/her players and who cares about them.

Within this context the meaningful nature of sport for the women in the study made a significant contribution toward their making it part of their lives through adulthood. This lends support Light's (2008) contention that sport must have meaning for young people if they are to stay engaged in it. This helps them to better organize their lives, including family, school, and social relations; and, unlike males (Lee, Whitehead, & Balchin, 2000), they do not value it because of social status or recognition, because it makes them good looking, has health benefits, or provides competitive success. They value it because it is an intrinsically rewarding activity that fits their expectations; it is developed under their relatively autonomous control and not as result of others' wishes or pressures. They feel control over their participation and commit to their sport because it has meaning for them and is voluntarily part of their lives rather than imposed upon them.

Contrary to studies of sport participation that focus on burnout, dropout, and barriers to identify barriers, this study inquired into the positive aspects that enhance the athletes' experiences and encourage them to persist in sport and commit with an active life in adulthood. At the same time, qualitative research has been dominated by studies on elite sport (Walton, 2010) or deviant cases (Olthuis, Zamboanga, Martens, & Ham, 2011); yet, it is also important to tell the stories of those who perform without striving for results or existential conflicts. While the tight focus of this study on six women is difficult to generalize, it provides useful insights into the reasons why they continued with sport from childhood into adulthood. By doing so, it adds to our understanding of experiences and the meanings of sport that can make it attractive for people to participate, particularly in regard to girls and women in sport. The insights provided into personal experience and meaning provided by this study can throw some light on the theme of sport persistence at a time when it is so tempting to look at physical education and youth sport only as policy tools and not for their intrinsic personal value.

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