

The impact of competing at the youth Olympic games on future involvement in high performance sport?

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Introduction

In February 2016, Norway hosted the second edition of the winter Youth Olympic Games (YOG) in Lillehammer. The concept of the YOG continues to be questioned by internal (e.g., international federations and International Olympic Committee (IOC) members) and external (e.g., media) stakeholders to the Olympic Movement. Although the former IOC President, Jacques Rogge, presented the YOG idea as one to help combat obesity and increase sport participation, there was also the hope of targeting the younger demographic, both as athletes and as consumers of sports events, to ensure they continue to be engaged in the Olympic Movement. It is only now that we are in a position to examine the medium to long-term impact of participation in YOG and assess the extent to which the YOG can be a vehicle to foster deeper engagement in (high performance) sport.

The aim of this investigation was to assess the significance of competing in the YOG for the young athletes' sport development and specifically whether they are still competing at a high level in their sport.

Theoretical framework

The success of young athletes is in part attributed to the management decisions that give young athletes an opportunity to excel and compete at the highest level in their sport. According to Sotiriadou and De Bosscher (2013), the factors that contribute to international success can be explored from macro, meso and micro perspectives. In this empirical investigation, we focus on the micro level and factors that will attract, retain and nurture them and those that might cause them to terminate their career. Factors that influence the young athletes' development include being selected for a competition such as YOG (Parent, Kristiansen, & MacIntosh, 2014), where they can gain experience, have the right emotional and technical support system/entourage (e.g., family, coaches) (Kristiansen & Parent, 2014), and the capacity of the young athletes to handle a dual career of education and sport practice and competition (Wylleman & Reints, 2010).

Methodology

We used a retrospective survey design methodology to collect data from former Norwegian YOG participants (from 2010, 2012 and 2014). Mixed method survey questions were designed to explore if and how participating at the YOG had affected their future career in sport. From the three first editions of the YOG, Norway sent 64 athletes, and of these, 58 responded to the survey in December 2015 (so 5.5, 3.75 and 1.5 years post-event). Descriptive statistics, along with analyses of variance

and regression analyses, were conducted on the Likert-type scale data. The qualitative data were compared through manual content analysis. Emerging findings were compared and discussed among the researchers (investigator triangulation; Patton, 2002).

Results, discussion and conclusion

The respondents were an experienced group that felt they did well during their competition (70% of the respondents were happy with their performance). Of those in the study, 17 athletes (29%) reported that they had left elite sport. The main reason for leaving appeared to be a lack of support from their entourage. The relationship with their coach was the most significant factor in predicting current involvement. Those that stayed in sport perceived high levels of coaching support whereas those who left sport perceived less coach support.

In summary, the study contributes to the sport development literature by providing empirical evidence of the impact of youth elite multi-sport events on athletes' careers.

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