
THE IMPACT OF CHILDHOOD SPORT PARTICIPATION ON ADULT SPORT PARTICIPATION IN FORMER DIVISION I VARSITY ATHLETES

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Synopsis:

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Abstract:

AIM OF ABSTRACT/PAPER

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THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Iso-Ahola's (1994) Leisure Repertoire Theory, adult leisure behavior is built upon childhood experiences. Therefore, the foundations for a lifelong healthy, active lifestyle are set during adolescence. However, current youth sport culture in many countries is trending towards an early-specialization structure that limits access to physical activity opportunities through sport (Baker, Cobley, & Fraser-Thomas, 2009). Because early specialization can restrict adolescents' sporting repertoires to a single sporting experience during the critical formative stages of their development, these athletes may be deprived of the associated mental and physical benefits of varied sport participation and they may experience difficulties in adulthood when attempting to engage in new sports (e.g., Baker, 2003). Therefore, finding the appropriate balance between breadth and depth in an adolescent sporting repertoire is crucial. While previous research has established a connection between an individual's participation in sport activities as an adolescent and participation in sport activities as an adult, to our knowledge, no study has been conducted directly linking the number of sports played during childhood and continuation of participation. This study sought to determine the relationship between the breadth of an adolescent sporting repertoire and

adult's current sport participation.

METHODOLOGY

Former U.S. collegiate varsity athletes (n=148, response rate=30.3%) who had graduated between 1987 and 1993 were invited to complete an online self-assessment survey that evaluated the breadth of adolescent sporting repertoire and current adult physical activity levels. Former varsity athletes were chosen because they were guaranteed to have an adolescent sporting repertoire, may have had a variety of sports and breadth of sports in these repertoires, depending on the presence and extent of any specialization. Adolescent sporting repertoires were measured using the Sports and Fitness Industry Association (2012) guidelines for consistent, medium-level sport participation.

RESULTS

Respondents' average age was 46 years old and 63.7% were male. The sample population did provide a wide range of adolescent sporting repertoires. Participants reported adolescent sporting repertoires consisting of between 0 and 11 sports, with a mean of 3.5. Adult sporting repertoires displayed a much narrower variability, ranging from 0 to 3 sports, with a mean of 0.69. Over half of the respondents were no longer engaged in any sport as adults. Regression models indicated that each sport in an individual's adolescent sporting repertoire resulted in that individual being 1.2 times as likely to still be an active sport participant as an adult. When controlling for demographic factors, the breadth of the adolescent sporting repertoire was still a significant predictor ($p = 0.040$) of adolescent sporting participation. The carryover viability from adolescence to adulthood of different sports may not be the same, however. Accordingly, respondents' repertoires were analyzed using McNemar's Chi-Square test to see which, if any, sports had a significant continuity within an individual's sporting repertoire. Results showed that American Football, Basketball, Soccer, and Swimming/Diving all showed a significant decline in participation from adolescence to adulthood. Additionally, Baseball also displayed a significant decline, both from participation in baseball as an adolescent to participation in Baseball, Slow-, or Fast-Pitch Softball as an adult. Cross Country runners were significantly likely to continue with some form of general running (either road or trail). However, the carryover from Cross Country running as an adolescent to Cross Country running as an adult was the only significant sport-specific correlation.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

These findings demonstrated a significant positive correlation between the number of sports played during adolescence and the number of sports played during adulthood. Additionally, when controlling for gender, family structure, and presence of children in the home, it was determined that each sport engaged in during adolescence resulted in an additional, cumulative 20% chance that that individual would still be engaged in sport as an adult. Furthermore, results indicated that specific sports showed either a significant decline in participation (baseball, basketball, American football, soccer, swimming, and volleyball) or significant level of retention (running) from

adolescence to adulthood. Accordingly, while it may be important to involve children in a diversity of sporting opportunities, the specific sports played during adolescence appear to influence those played during adulthood. Consequently, a further examination of individual versus team sports, and sport-specific long-term viability is merited. The results of this study contribute to the body of literature in youth sport and can serve to guide to inform parents and organizations involved in the delivery of youth sport programs.

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