Each year in the USA 35% of the participants in children’s sports programmes withdraw. While some move to other sports, others drop out altogether. The research literature identifies reasons given by young people for leaving a sport as well as their motivations for participation. In the search for a way to reduce the drop-out rate, the author focuses on the concept of “fun”, which features on both lists. Her research in youth swimming established that fun has different meanings to children and adults. Importantly, what young people view as fun is far reaching, encompasses many aspects of the sports experience and is constantly changing. An important implication is that to maintain the motivation for participation, fun must be purposefully planned into a sport programme. Based on her findings, the author discusses eight strategies, most of a psycho-social nature, for reducing dropout from youth athletics. This article was originally given as a presentation at the 2002 International Athletic Foundation Workshop on Youth Athletics.
Motives for participation and discontinuation

Several investigations have been conducted to try to understand why young athletes are dropping out of various sport programmes. Additionally, because much can be learned about withdrawal by understanding why athletes participate in sport programmes, this has also been a topic of investigation. In a review of literature on sport dropout, GOULD and HORN (1984) concluded that children withdraw from sport due to numerous motives including:

◆ conflicts of interest
◆ lack of playing time
◆ lack of success or improvement
◆ lack of fun
◆ dislike of the coach
◆ boredom
◆ injury

A cursory review of these motives indicates that while some of the motives for withdrawal may be unavoidable (i.e., conflicts of interest, injury), several motives can be addressed with modifications to aspects of the sport environment.

Regarding motives for participation, factors that arise across a variety of sports include:

◆ to have fun
◆ to improve skills
◆ to make friends
◆ to get/stay in shape

Subsequent research on motives for participation and discontinuation of youths in a variety of sports has resulted in similar findings (EWING and SEEFELDT, 1989; KLINT and WEISS, 1986; TUFFEY, 1997).

Let’s look at one study more closely. While the following research focused on young swimmers, keep in mind that “kids are kids” in that the same motives are prominent regardless of the specific sport.

In the research by TUFFEY (1997), an attempt was made to understand factors involved in continued participation and dropout from competitive swimming. Young athletes (ages 9-18) who had recently withdrawn from and young athletes still involved in competitive swimming were asked to complete a survey assessing factors involved in participation and withdrawal. Specifically, 490 age-group swimmers completed a survey where they were asked to rate various motives for participation and discontinuation on a 7-point Likert type scale.

The analysis of most importance for our purposes relate to the identification of the top rated factors influencing participation and discontinuation. The top six factors related to why kids report taking part in swimming include having fun, to be/stay in shape, to be with friends, to compete, to improve or meet goals, and to meet new people. The top six factors related to why kids report leaving swimming include taking too much time, a negative coach, other sports/activities, being boring, school conflicts, and not being fun.

As can be noted, these factors are closely aligned with the factors identified in the review of literature by GOULD and HORN (1984) and are closely aligned with similar research related to motives for participation and discontinuation.

Keep these factors in mind, as they will serve as the basis for many of the recommendations related to strategies to keep kids involved in Athletics.

Delving deeper into the concept of fun

Before proceeding to a discussion of strategies, it is beneficial to take a closer look at the concept of fun, as it seems to be a
motivational factor that has a critical influence of participation and withdrawal. We need to delve a little deeper into the concept of fun to determine more precisely what young athletes mean when they say they participate because it is fun and leave sport because it is no longer fun.

Based on the research findings related to understanding why kids swim and why they quit swimming, TUFFEY and GOULD (2001) took a closer look at the notion of fun. The impetus behind the research into fun was the responses of coaches. When discussing the finding that kids swim because it is fun, a natural implication is that coaches need to structure fun into the training environment to keep kids involved. Many coaches responded that practice isn’t a time to “goof around” and play water games – which is how they were defining “fun”. It was felt that further clarification was needed as kids may have a different or broader concept of fun.

There were two phases to the project. First, focus group interviews (4 groups of 12 athletes ages 8-18) were conducted to tap into athletes’ perspective as to what specifically is fun and what is not fun about swimming. Common responses were developed into a survey that was used in the second phase of the project. In this second phase, 277 athletes completed a survey where they were instructed to rate the degree to which a given item was something “fun” about swimming. For our purposes, the most relevant finding relates to the identification of the “top rated items”. Let’s take a look at what young athletes perceive to be “fun” about swimming (remember, kids are kids so this most likely applies to all youth sports):

- Coach compliments and encourages me
- Being with friends
- Winning/feelings of accomplishment
- Being part of a team/being on team relays
- Varied workouts (doing things beyond just swimming laps)

The young athletes identified a variety of other factors that made sport fun - the common themes that arose related to “Coach”, “Friends”, “Team”, positive “Feelings”, and “Workouts”. It is these influences that we need to pay special attention to when attempting to keep the fun in sport and keep kids involved.

It is important to note that, as would be expected, young athletes’ perception of fun changes as they age. The trend identified from this research is that the young athletes need a lot of “stuff” to make it fun. That is, they identified things such as “getting medals”, “doing relays in practice”, “coach knows me”, and “getting t-shirts” as fun elements of participation. The older athletes, on the other hand, had a more internally driven perception of fun such that “working hard”, “the team element” and “tough dryland/weight training” were identified as being the most fun elements of participation.

Based on findings from this project, several implications can be drawn. First, adults and kids may have different definitions of fun. We need to be concerned with the kids’ definitions. Second, fun and participation in organised sport need to go hand-in-hand; what kids view as fun is so far-reaching and encompasses so many aspects of the sport experience that it needs to be a purposeful part of organised sport. Third, fun as defined by kids can readily be structured into the training environment without detracting from training objectives. Lastly, an athlete’s concept of fun develops as he/she develops, so what is fun or enjoyable for a 10 or 11 year old differs from what is fun for a 17 year old.

With this understanding of motives for participation, motives for discontinuation, and factors influencing fun in youth sports, let’s turn to a discussion of strategies that can be implemented to prevent dropout from youth athletics programmes.
Strategies to prevent dropout

As mentioned earlier, these strategies are derived from our understanding of young peoples’ motives for participation in sport and reasons for discontinuation. Because of that, most of the strategies are psycho-social in nature.

In formulating strategies to implement, they should be combined with our knowledge of growth and development, long-term athlete development, and other areas of pediatric sport science and implications of this knowledge. Keep in mind that a variety of individuals and organisations can and should take responsibility for working to prevent dropout. The following recommendations are directed at no one person or group in particular but rather should be looked at closely by all who are concerned with keeping youth in athletics.

1. Clearly define the philosophy of youth athletics:

Coaches, athletes, parents, officials, administrators and others involved in youth athletics need to have a clear understanding of the philosophy of the programmes. This will ensure that all involved parties are operating from the same “foundation”. Furthermore, and of utmost importance, the philosophy needs to be athlete-centred. With an athlete-centred approach, the physical, psychological, and social development of the athlete is of primary importance.

2. Facilitate effective coach and parent education:

Coaches and parents exert a significant influence on the young athlete. As was noted in the research on dropout from sport, the perception of a “negative coach” arose as a primary reason why youngsters leave sports. These individuals play a critical role in the youth sport experience. They, therefore, need to be educated as to the significance of their role and what they need to do and say to create a positive experience for the young athlete. As will be seen, many of the suggested strategies to prevent dropout are directly or indirectly tied to coaches and coach behaviors – adding further support to the importance of coach education programmes. These programmes need to be focused on how to effectively coach young athletes, as we know they are different from adults.

3. Purposefully incorporate FUN into the training environment:

From research and anecdotal accounts, fun has been identified as a critical factor in participation and dropout. That is, kids report being motivated to participate because it is fun and, conversely, report leaving because the sport is no longer enjoyable. Every effort needs to be made to structure the youth sport environment so it is an enjoyable experience. Fun isn’t about “goofing around” as we might initially assume. Rather, fun for the young athlete relates to team, friends, positive feelings, interaction with the coach, and variety and challenge within workouts. Given this, strategies to incorporate fun into the youth athletics environment are only limited by our creativity. Some ideas that come to mind based on experiences with other sports and knowledge of the athletics environment:

- Relays, relays, relays – bring more relays to youth Athletics.
- Structure multidiscipline competitions, i.e., each athlete completes in a throwing, jumping and running event.
- Allow for or create opportunities to interact with friends.
- As a coach, know the athletes as people.
- Communicate/provide feedback to each athlete on a regular basis.
- Be creative with scoring so many experience the positive feelings of success.
4. Integrate social interaction – allow for affiliation needs to be met:

A primary reason youngsters participate in sport is to be with friends and to meet new friends – the social element of sport is of great importance. The sport environment needs to allow for these needs to be met. As with the suggestion of incorporating fun into training, strategies for integrating a social element into youth athletes is only limited by our creativity. It can be accomplished by simply allowing time for interaction, by structuring social activities off the track, or by creating opportunities for social interaction within the training. Some suggestions include:

◆ Emphasise the team in athletics – make the athletes feel part of a team through team cheers, team uniforms/ t-shirts, team pizza parties, etc.
◆ Integrate more relays into youth athletics.
◆ Structure drills or creative training sessions that require interaction with teammates.
◆ Build in time at the beginning or end of training for social interaction – purposefully make social interaction a part of the environment.

5. Carefully define “success”: 

A primary motivation for participation in sport is to improve skills, or so young athletes tell us. This motive has been found to be more important than winning. An effective strategy to prevent young athletes from leaving athletics would be to define success based on skill improvement; to make it relative to the individual. Coaches and parents need to be educated about the importance of emphasising a process goal orientation where success relates to the process of performance. With such an orientation, improvement in skill would be a measure of success - just what the young athlete wants and needs.

6. Emphasise and reward skill development and improvement:

Young athletes are different – physically, psychologically, developmentally, socially. With such young, still developing athletes, it doesn’t make much sense to recognise and reward athletes based solely on head to head competition – the decks aren’t evenly stacked. Instead, we should be assessing and evaluating each athlete’s performance relative to him- or herself. Furthermore, we need to structure rewards and recognition based on improvement as opposed to outcome. How about having meetings where awards are given to those who have the greatest improvements of their own best times, throws, or jumps? Or, can we structure competitions to be evaluated based on a combination of technique and time/distance? Such approaches more appropriately reward what we are trying to emphasise and what the young athletes view as a motive for participating.

7. Emphasise and build athlete competence:

A young athlete wants to “do something I am good at”; that is, he or she wants to feel competent. Coaches, parents, administrators and others involved in the sport experience need to help the young athletes (any age athlete for that matter) feel good about their athletic endeavors. Doing so is a step towards keeping them involved in the sport. Feelings of competence - of having ability in an activity – have been found through research to be closely tied to a multitude of positive attributes. Besides being correlated with participation choice, competence has been found to also correlate with enjoyment, satisfaction, persistence, and increased effort, to name a few. These relationships add further support to the importance of purposefully striving to enhance perceptions of competence in young athletes.
What can be done within the sport environment to build competence? Here are a few suggestions:

◆ Success builds competence so structure success into the training environment. On a daily basis, the young athlete needs to get reinforcement about their abilities; they need to see success (defined relative to individual improvement).
◆ Structure success into the competitive environment.
◆ Provide consistent feedback and technical instruction. Such feedback and instruction communicates to the athletes what they need to do to improve their skills and abilities.

8. Mandate variety:

Young athletes want and need variety. Part of what makes the sport experience fun is doing different things in training; monotony in training leads to boredom, which is a primary reason, kids report leaving sport. Again, adding variety to training and competition is only limited by creativity and a willingness to change. Some possible ideas:

◆ Participation in multiple events so the young athlete is training in running, throws and jumps. Not only did this make for a more well-rounded athlete, but it provides the athlete the variety he/she desires.
◆ Different drills/workouts to accomplish the same training objective.
◆ Variety to daily training as well as engagement throughout the training session - the young athlete needs to be kept engaged both physically and mentally.
◆ Kids love to compete - structure competition into the training environment for variety and for fun.

9. Prevent injuries:

Injury, unfortunately, occurs as a function of participation in athletics. They also play a role in young athlete’s decision to leave sport. Therefore, every effort needs to be taken to ensure the sport environment is a safe, healthy place for the participants. A multitude of steps can be taken to help in preventing injuries such as having in place progressive training programmes designed for the young athlete, a coach education programme that addresses safely, first aid, and injury prevent and open lines of communication between the coach and athlete so issues of injury/hurt can be discussed.

References


