Exploring Coach Perceptions of Youth Sport Specialization: A Comparison of the High School and Club Sport Contexts

Justin S. DiSantii, MS¹ George R. Post, PhD, ATC² David Bell, PhD³ Dan Schaefer³ M. Alison Brooks, MD⁴ Tim McGuire, PhD⁴ Karl Erickson, PhD⁴

¹Michigan State University, Institute for the Study of Youth Sports, Department of Kinesiology, College of Education, East Lansing, MI ²San Diego State University, School of Exercise and Nutritional Sciences, San Diego, CA ³The University of Wisconsin at Madison, Department of Kinesiology, School of Education, Madison, WI ⁴The University of Wisconsin at Madison, Department of Orthopedics and Rehabilitation, School of Medicine & Public Health, Madison, WI

OBJECTIVES
A key focus of contemporary youth sport research examines how athletes distribute their time and energy within a single sport versus between multiple sports – frequently referred to as “youth sport specialization.” As the popular and scholarly attention to athlete sport participation have increased, specialization – particularly at an early age – has been posited as potentially harmful to the overall health, well-being, and development of youth participants. Despite recommendations advising against early specialization, the prevalence of highly specialized youth athletes continues as a concerning trend in both the academic and practical domains of youth sport and pediatric sports medicine. A novel proposed avenue for better understanding the gap between recommendations and the specialized behaviors of youth athletes is to explore the perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs of youth sport stakeholders that may guide athletes to select their respective sport participation pathway. Additionally, recent literature has underscored the importance of accounting for context when examining youth sport behaviors. A specific contextual consideration important to this pathway selection is that of high school vs. club sport settings. Therefore, the purpose of this current study was to compare perceptions of youth sport specialization between high school and club sport coaches, as well as to examine if characteristics predict perceptions of specialization within each group. We hypothesized that the heightened professionalization of club sports would align with more favorable attitudes by coaches toward youth sport specialization in comparison to high school coaches.

METHODS
This study undertook a novel approach in examining youth sport specialization: Rather than exclusively examining youth athletes’ sport participation behaviors, this design quantified the attitudes, beliefs, and values of a group of sport stakeholders that likely influence these athletes’ decisions of whether to specialize in a single sport. Additionally, a meaningful contribution of this study was the comparison between the high school setting and club sport context. As hypothesized, club sport coaches rated elements of specialization as more positive and adaptive in comparison to high school coaches – reinforcing this context as a more professionalized climate for youth athletes. Examination of contextual characteristics emphasized the importance of these considerations in better understanding the decision of whether to specialize. Finally, the non-significance of the MLR equations for each sport group indicates that the contexts themselves (i.e., club vs. high school sports) are the most salient influencer of how a coach perceives this phenomenon.

RESULTS
Global Perceptions of Club vs. High School Coaches
On average, club coaches rated specialization as a significantly more positive, adaptive in comparison to their high school counterparts:
- Mean Rating: Club = 2.43 ± 0.25; HS = 2.31 ± 0.21, t(5, 266) = 1.41; p < 0.001

Contextual Characteristics
For high school coaches, a significant difference in mean rating of specialization perceptions were found for team gender and sport coached; school size was not found to significantly impact mean ratings of specialization perceptions for this group:
- Gender Coached: Male: 2.31 ± 0.21, Female: 2.31 ± 0.21, Both: 2.39 ± 0.21; p = 0.04
- Sport: Basketball: 2.26 ± 0.20, Soccer: 2.37 ± 0.21, Volleyball: 2.34 ± 0.21; p = 0.05
- School Size: A (0): 2.34 ± 0.21, B (or 2): 2.28 ± 0.20, C (or 3): 2.31 ± 0.21, D (or 4): 2.33 ± 0.21; p = 0.05

Multiple Linear Regression
The multiple linear regression for the high school coaches did not yield a significant equation to predict ratings of specialization based on their background characteristics (i.e., team age, years of coaching experience, self-rated coaching quality, coach age) and contextual covariates: "high school." The Multiple Linear Regression for the club coaches did not produce any significant results.

CONCLUSIONS
The results of this study indicate that a fruitful avenue towards understanding the gap between recommendations against youth sport specialization and the perceived increase in this trend is to examine how this phenomenon is perceived by various sport stakeholders. Future research should continue to flesh out the link between perceptions and behaviors of youth sport participants.

Analyses of the coach groups show that club sport athletes may be at greater risk of being pressured into specializing than high school athletes due to heightened attitudes in favor of this practice. Additionally, the contextual comparisons show that certain characteristics may expose athletes to variable attitudes toward specializing even within these groups (e.g., soccer more at risk than basketball). Youth sport and pediatric sport medicine practitioners should critically analyze the specific characteristics of their context and better understand how this atmosphere may promote or protect athletes from investing in a single sport in a maladaptive fashion.

Finally, this study highlighted the continued need to educate sport stakeholders regarding the potential risks of specializing to instill more adaptive perceptions, as well as the need for more practical solutions and safeguards to promote positive youth sport experiences.