

Exploring Coach Perceptions of Youth Sport Specialization:

A Comparison of the High School and Club Sport Contexts

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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 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 the current study was to compare perceptions of youth sport specialization between high school and club sport coaches, as well as whether coach 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

• Participants

- 769 coaches completed the full survey (266 female; 503 male)
- 497 High School Coaches; 272 Club Coaches
- Sports Coached: Basketball (n = 290), Soccer (n = 223), Volleyball (n = 256)

• Measures

- Sport Background Questionnaire
 - 1) School/community size; 2) Team gender; 3) Sport coached
- Youth Sport Specialization Perception Scale (YSSPS)
 - 25 items → examine attitudes, beliefs, and values related to specialization
 - Globally quantifies relevant elements of specialization as more or less positive/adaptive
 - 4-point Likert scale (higher scores = more favorable perceptions)
 - E.g., “All athletes should specialize in one sport by the time they reach high school”

• Analysis

- An independent samples t-test was conducted between HS and Club coach groups to determine whether their mean ratings on the YSSPS differed
- One-way ANOVAs were conducted for each of the three contextual characteristics (i.e., school/community size, team gender, sport coached)
- Multiple linear regressions were conducted for each group to explore whether coach characteristics were predictive of perceptions of sport specialization

RESULTS

Global Perceptions of Club vs. High School Coaches

On average, club coaches rated specialization as a significantly more positive, adaptive practice in comparison to their high school coach counterparts:

- Mean Rating: Club = 2.43±0.25; HS = 2.31±0.21, $t_{(767)} = 1.41$; $p < 0.001$

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±0.19, Volleyball: 2.34±0.21; $p<0.001$
- *School Size*: A (or 1): 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 coach quality, coach age)

- *High School Coaches MLR*: $F(5, 491) = 1.52$, $p = .18$, $R^2 = .02$

Similarly, the overall regression equation of coach background characteristics for the club coaches was not significant

- *Club Coaches MLR*: $F(5, 266) = .59$, $p = .71$, $R^2 = .01$

DISCUSSION

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 of the high school vs. club sport contexts.

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 coach 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.

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 regarding specialization.

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 to 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.



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