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Sports Coaching Review

"Good Athletes Have Fun": A Foucauldian Reading of University Coaches' Uses of Fun --Manuscript Draft--

Full Title:	"Good Athletes Have Fun": A Foucauldian Reading of University Coaches' Uses of Fun
Manuscript Number:	RSPC-2017-0027
Article Type:	Special Issue
Keywords:	fun; Foucault; coaching
Abstract:	<p>Fun is deeply ingrained in the ways we talk about and understand sport: Having fun is what makes sport positive and healthy. In this paper, we problematize this view of fun by drawing on the work of poststructuralist philosopher Michel Foucault (1991). Using his concept of discipline we examine how fun, a psychological construct, might inform coaches' practices. We interviewed 10 varsity coaches from a Canadian university to apprehend how they incorporate fun within their practices. The results indicated that the coaches used fun to overcome the 'grind' of physical skill training. In addition, fun was used to develop and naturalize a need for athletes' positive psychological traits and skills. In their training contexts, thus, the coaches clearly employed fun to reinforce their use of a number of dominant disciplinary training practices. As a result, instead of operating as a positive force for athlete engagement, the incorporation of fun further legitimized and perpetuated coaches' 'normal' training practices. We conclude our analyses by offering some recommendations for the development of more ethical, less disciplinary uses of fun in high-performance coaching contexts.</p>

Introduction

Fun is deeply ingrained in the ways we talk about and understand sport. In his classic book *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga (1950) already took interest in theorizing fun/enjoyment in sport, play and physical activity. The overarching belief that guides this scholarly interest is that the essence of sport and play is enjoyment, or more importantly perhaps, that it *should* be about fun/enjoyment (e.g., Bigelow et al. 2001; Mastrich, 2002; Small, 2002; Smoll et al., 1988). Over the last few decades, a body of knowledge has constituted itself around the articulated concern to ‘bring the fun back in sport’ by challenging the win at all cost mentality thought to be prevalent in professional sport and to have permeated and denatured youth sport (e.g., Smoll & Smith, 1987; Thompson, 1997, 2003).

The concept of fun seems *a priori* to stand in stark opposition to sport as hard, difficult and brutal as well as monotonous and over serious. As such, governmentally endorsed sporting and coaching frameworks have reactivated fun (e.g., the Long Term Athlete Development plan in Canada). These frameworks present fun as a moral and logical reaction to the well-documented excesses of not only high-performance sport and professional sport but increasingly all levels of sport (e.g., Avner, Markula, & Denison, 2017; Cahill & Pearl, 1993; Clifford & Feezell, 2010; Hyman, 2009). Fun in sport is, thus, generally understood as inherently desirable and necessary to make sport positive and healthy.

Our interest in fun, in contrast, is spurred on by our sporting experiences that did not always align with the commonly held view of fun as innocuous and unproblematic. For example, as a high-performance soccer player, the first author was repeatedly made to feel by her coaches that if she did not have fun she did not have the ‘right’ mental makeup to play at

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4 the highest level of the game. Fun was, in this regard, used as a strategy to naturalize various
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6 sporting and coaching practices. Accordingly, the application of fun supported, rather than
7
8 opposed, training as hard and monotonous. It was against this background that we became
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10 interested in examining how fun is understood and used by coaches. To help us in this regard,
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12 we drew on the work of Michel Foucault.
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16 In what follows, we first review the coaching literature on fun and introduce our
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18 Foucauldian theoretical framework. We then outline our study's methods. Following this, we
19
20 discuss the results of our analysis and conclude with making some recommendations for the
21
22 development of more ethical and effective coaching and sporting practices related to fun.
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25 26 **The Coaching Literature on Fun** 27

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29 The concept of fun in sport and physical activity settings has mostly been theorized in the
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31 sport psychology literature on motivation (e.g., Allen, 2003; Griffin et al, 1993; Jackson,
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33 2000; Mandigo & Couture, 1996; Newton & Duda, 1993; Scanlan & Lethwaite, 1986;
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35 Wankel & Sefton, 1989). These sport psychology studies emphasized the importance of fun
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37 as a key component of effective coaching. They pointed to such positive outcomes of a fun as
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39 developing group cohesion, increasing individual hard work and team performance (e.g.,
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41 Turman, 2003; Yukelson, 2011), enhancing coach-parent relationships (e.g., Smoll,
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43 Cumming, & Smith, 2011) and reducing performance anxiety stress (e.g., Smith, Smoll, &
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45 Cumming, 2007). These studies represent fun as inherently desirable as it improves athletes'
46
47 performances. As a result, the focus of these studies has exclusively been on understanding
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49 how fun can be harnessed in different coaching and sporting contexts to achieve the desired
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51 outcome of winning.
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4 As we wanted to problematize the idea that fun has only positive uses, we needed
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6 specific theoretical tools that allowed us to analyze the effects of fun from a different
7
8 perspective. To do this, we drew from poststructuralist studies that have adopted a more
9
10 critical perspective on sport and coaching practices. However, within poststructuralism only a
11
12 few studies have looked at fun in sporting contexts (Lauss & Szigetvari, 2010; Pringle, 2009),
13
14 while none have looked at fun and coaching. We, therefore, turned to other poststructuralist
15
16 work, more specifically Foucauldian studies of coaching, to inform our analysis of how
17
18 coaches talk about incorporating fun within their practices.
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23 Many coaching scholars have found Foucault's (1991) concept of 'discipline' useful
24
25 to critically examine sport (e.g., Barker-Ruchti & Tinning, 2010; Denison, 2007; Denison &
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27 Mills, 2014; Jones & Denison, 2016; Lang, 2010; Shogan, 1999, 2007). Foucault defined
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29 discipline as a technique, a form of power which operates primarily on the body in order to
30
31 forge a "docile body that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved" (p. 136). Most
32
33 sport coaching contexts lend themselves very well to a critical Foucauldian analysis of
34
35 discipline that moulds and transforms individual bodies into highly productive and efficient
36
37 sporting bodies through the control and organization of time, space and movement. For
38
39 example, Denison (2007) drew on his own experiences as a former high-performance middle
40
41 distance running coach to discuss how, over time, the disciplinary techniques that he used to
42
43 manage and control his athletes' performances led to athlete disengagement,
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45 underperformance and eventually to one of his athletes retiring from running. Denison, Mills,
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47 and Konoval (2015) further problematized modern coaching techniques and the disciplinary
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49 legacy of high-performance sport by emphasizing the striking similarities between these
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4 techniques and those used in hospitals, workshops, prisons and army barracks to train,
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6 discipline and control individual bodies.
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9 Foucault understood power as operating effectively in the micro-contexts of everyday
10 situations where bodies can be trained to operate efficiently and usefully. Power, Foucault
11 demonstrated, is present in all contexts where people interact with each other instead of
12 simply being a force imposed on coaches and athletes primarily by national and international
13 sporting bodies. When individual athletes are trained to become efficient, but docile
14 performers, they turn into ‘targets’ of power instead of users of power. However, as Foucault
15 (1991) was also careful to point out, discipline must not be understood as simply repressive
16 and deductive. Rather, discipline is productive, “it ‘makes’ individuals; it is the specific
17 technique of a power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its
18 exercise” (p. 170). Thus, Foucauldian scholars (Markula & Pringle, 2006; Shogan, 1999,
19 2007) also emphasized the relational and productive aspects of power and the active role that
20 coaches, athletes, fitness experts and sport scientists can play in the widespread use of
21 disciplinary techniques. As Markula and Silk (2011) summarized, “each individual is a part of
22 power relations and thus, part of the negotiation, circulation and alteration of discourses” (p.
23 51).
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45 Fun, as a psychological construct, is not as directly applicable to sport training as
46 physiological or biomechanical principles of bodily practices. Foucault asserted, however,
47 that power relations are deeply intertwined with all knowledge that, in turn, can direct
48 everyday practices. Therefore, all sciences, including human sciences such as psychology
49 provide tools to create docile bodies as they inform how we practice sport. On the one hand,
50 fun can be promoted as a disciplinary tool at the micro-level of coaching as well as at the
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4 macro-level of sport policy making. In this sense, it can become a part of endorsing
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6 disciplinary training practices that produce docile athletes. On the other hand, fun can also be
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8 productive of individual athletes and coaches who realize themselves as users, not merely as
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10 instruments, of power and thus, use fun to reduce the disciplinary effects of training.
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14 In this study, we expand beyond the disciplinary use of time, space and programming
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16 to look at how fun, a psychological construct, might operate to endorse certain types of
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18 dominant coaching practices. In this regard, the question that underpinned our study was:
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20 How is fun productive of disciplinary techniques of power in coaching? And in what follows
21
22 we outline in more detail how we conducted our study.
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24

25 26 **Methods**

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28 To answer our research question we interviewed varsity coaches about their understandings
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30 of the role of fun in their everyday coaching practices.
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33 34 *Sample*

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36 To select our participants, we used purposeful sampling (Markula & Silk, 2011;
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38 Patton, 2002). We further specified our sample by using convenience sampling (Patton, 2002)
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40 and approached coaches at a large Canadian University with a record of outstanding sport
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42 success to take part in our study. We then applied criterion based sampling technique “which
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44 involves selecting participants who meet some predetermined criterion of importance”
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46 (Patton, 2002, p. 94) to finalize our participants. Our criteria specified the following: coaches
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48 with National Coaching Certification of Canada (NCCP) Level 3, coaches from women’s and
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50 men’s sports, female and male head coaches and lastly coaches from both individual and team
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52 sports. We limited our sample size to 10 coaches from the following varsity sports:
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Basketball (W)	Soccer (W)
Curling (M/W)	Swimming (M/W)

Football (M)	Volleyball (M)
Hockey (M)	Volleyball (W)
Soccer (M)	Wrestling (M/W)

The interviews

While there are benefits and drawbacks associated with all modes and forms of interviewing, we chose to conduct individual, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews (Markula & Silk, 2011) with our sample of coaches because these were most likely to produce rich, nuanced, contextualized and specific knowledge about how coaches think about fun as part of their understanding of how to coach and how they promote fun within their practices. Following Gibson and Brown’s (2009) advice concerning the design and scripting of interview questions, we started with more general questions and progressed towards research specific questions pertaining to our sample of coaches’ understanding and use of fun in their coaching practices. We also organized our Foucauldian themed interview guide (Markula & Pringle, 2006) to answer our Foucauldian informed research question on how fun might act as an instrument of power in coaching. We specifically focused on how coaches think about fun as part of their understanding of how to coach and also how they incorporate fun within their practices within the dominant disciplinary framework of performance sport.

Data collection and analysis

All the interviews were conducted by the first author who audio-recorded and transcribed the interviews. She also offered research participants the opportunity to follow up and clarify some of their statements if they felt the need to do so. The interviews were analysed using theory-based analysis technique following Markula and Pringle’s (2006) modified version of Foucault’s genealogical method. This modified version follows the following steps:

- Identification of themes based on our interview guide;
- Analysis of the themes (intersection of themes, discrepancies between themes and emergence of new themes);
- Connection with power relations, theory and previous literature (Markula & Silk, 2011, p. 109).

Research Validation

Along with criteria of researcher reflexivity and clarity and methodological consistency, we drew on Richardson's (2000) concept of 'crystallization' as a judgement criterion for our qualitative Foucauldian study. Unlike triangulation, which seeks to combine various methods or data sources to insure or enhance the validity, reliability, and generalizability of research results, crystallization seeks to capture the multiple and the multidimensional aspects of research knowledge through various angles of approach. As Richardson explained:

Crystallization, without losing structure, deconstructs the traditional idea of 'validity' (we feel how there is no single truth, we see how texts validate themselves), and crystallization provides us with a deepened, complex, thoroughly partial, understanding of the topic. Paradoxically, we know more and doubt what we know...we know there is always more to know. (2000, p. 934)

Crystallization then as a validation criterion is not about insuring the defensibility and the legitimacy of a particular claim to 'Truth'. Rather in line with a poststructuralist conception of truth as subjective and multiple, it encourages researchers to always consider their topic from multiple perspectives and to produce rich, nuanced, coherent, reflexive, and contextualized research knowledge. This is what we sought to do in our interviews with

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4 coaches and in approaching our research question about the productive role of fun in
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6 endorsing dominant coaching practices.
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10 *Research Ethics*

11 We received approval from the Canadian Research Ethics Board (REB) for this study and
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13 followed their guidelines regarding the conduct of ethical research.
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17 In what follows, we next elaborate on the themes that we identified through our semi-
18
19 structured interviews with varsity coaches.
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22 **Results and Discussion**

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24 In this section, we present the results of our semi-structured interviews with 10 varsity
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26 coaches at a Canadian University. We organised this results section around the two most
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28 prominent themes in our interviews. We first discuss the instrumentalization of fun within
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30 effective physical training. We then discuss the role of fun in relation to varsity athlete
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32 development and in the strategic reproduction of psychological constructs such as ‘the good
33
34 athlete’ and ‘the good teammate’. We emphasize, however, that our identified themes and
35
36 their related findings are not independent and mutually exclusive when discussing the
37
38 complex interrelations between fun and coaching effectiveness and fun and varsity athlete
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40 development.
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46 **Coaches’ Instrumentalization of Fun in Physical Training**

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48 With the exception of one coach, who argued that fun/enjoyment is not central to his
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50 coaching or something that he actively tried to promote, the nine other coaches in our sample
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52 claimed fun to be something critical that they actively pursued during training and
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54 competition. However, many of the coaches also stated the difficulties of including fun in
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56 training and competition because fun means different things to different people and because
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4 different people enjoy different things in sport. For example, some athletes have fun “doing
5 silly games” (Sally, women’s team sport coach) or joking around, some athletes enjoy “the
6 team bonding and socializing aspects” of varsity sport (Will, men and women’s individual
7 sport coach), some athletes have fun “battling and competing and winning” (Harry, men’s
8 team sport coach) and some athletes have fun “working hard in training to become highly
9 skilled and successful athletes” (Viola, women’s team sport coach).

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19 These different views on fun echo Jackson’s (2000) statement that fun is a term which
20 lacks conceptual clarity. This does not, however, diminish its stated importance for coaches
21 both in terms of performance and success in varsity sport and in terms of athlete
22 development.

23 24 25 26 27 28 *Overcoming the ‘Grind’ of Physical Training*

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31 Indeed, one of the reasons fun matters is because coaches correlate it to athletic
32 performance and success. As Viola put it: “The happier we are, the more we enjoy what we
33 are doing, often the better we are performing.” In addition, fun was seen by the coaches as
34 critical in terms of long term athlete development in varsity sport and athlete motivation and
35 commitment: “The fun element is really key I think around motivation and just keeping them
36 enjoying what they are doing” (Viola, women’s team sport coach). Viola’s statement was
37 echoed by many of the coaches including Victor who emphasized the importance of fun for
38 athlete retention in the face of ‘the grind’ of varsity sport training and competing. Fun was
39 seen as an antidote to athlete burnout, and as a way of helping athletes achieve their full
40 potential and reach the elite levels of sport. These statements and understandings of fun
41 support previous research (e.g. Avner, Markula & Denison, 2017), which has highlighted and
42 critiqued the strong rhetoric around fun as linked both to performance and positive long term
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4 athlete development in current key coach education websites such as the Sport for Life
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6 Website (S4L) found in Canada and programs such as the Long Term Athlete Development
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8 Program (LTAD) that have been implemented worldwide.
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11 While our sample of coaches recognized that there were many different types of fun in
12
13 sport, their statements overlapped in what they considered to be the grinding or ‘not fun’
14
15 aspects of varsity sport. Some of these aspects were the “long gruelling seasons”, the physical
16
17 demands and mental challenges of training and competing, as well as “monotonous
18
19 repetitive” training: “Well, I think that what a lot of the athletes will complain about is
20
21 boredom and doing the same drills over and over again” (Viola). However, while these might
22
23 be seen as obstacles to fun, these varsity sport training and competing practices were also
24
25 described as necessary to produce a winning performance. As Sally (women’s team sport
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27 coach) explained: “if you want to be really good, you don’t need the diversity because
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29 basically your formation is going to have you do a bunch of similar things quite frequently.
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31 So if you do it all the time, you are actually going to be better at it.”
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38 These non-fun yet effective practices of varsity sport were a source of tension and
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40 struggle which the coaches attempted to resolve or rationalize in various ways. One of the
41
42 strategies the coaches resorted to was to use variations or progressions designed to avoid
43
44 boredom that was seen as counterproductive both to performance and long term athlete
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46 development: “So I think the challenge for coaches is kind of tricking them [the athletes], to
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48 be honest, where they are doing the same things over and over again but you change a
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50 variation, you change something that just makes it feel different” (Viola). This quote shows
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52 that giving athletes the illusion of fun and variety is more important than varsity athletes
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54 actually having fun and enjoying variety in training.
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4 *Reinforcing Discipline and Optimizing Training Time*
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7 Aside from the use of progressions and modifications to avoid boredom and give the
8
9 illusion of variety and change, the coaches we interviewed described drawing on ‘the carrot
10
11 and stick’ approach in order to manage the tension between fun and gruelling
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13 and/monotonous ‘effective’ coaching practices. More specifically, coaches instrumentalized
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15 fun as an incentive or as a reward for hard work, discipline and excellence in training and
16
17 competitions. These specific uses of fun resulted from a dominant understanding of fun as the
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19 dichotomous opposite of hard work and discipline promoted by a large and increasingly
20
21 popular body of literature on positive youth development through sport (e.g., Sabock &
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23 Sabock, 2008; Smoll & Smith, 1987; Thompson, 1997, 2003). For example, many of the
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25 coaches chose to incorporate fun in warm-ups for the purpose of getting athletes motivated,
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27 energetic and focused for the serious hard work of training to ensue or at the end of practice
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29 as a reward for making it through the grind of training:
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36 And in the training I think that if you are doing a functional session then it is not fun,
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38 it is never going to be fun and so what you have to do is balance it off with having
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40 some kind of fun reward. That can be some kind of shooting competition or some kind
41
42 of session that they can recognize as fun. (Sally, women’s team sport coach)
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46 These practices related to fun, athlete productivity and the optimal use of training time echo
47
48 Foucault’s (1991) theorizing of discipline which as previously mentioned relates to specific
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50 techniques for shaping, organizing and controlling individual bodies. Here, Sally’s strategic
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52 partitioning and balancing of ‘work’ and ‘fun’ training sequences and activities in the
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54 planning and delivery of training is designed for one sole purpose: to maximize and optimize
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56 the ‘serious’ training time and ultimately to make her athletes more efficient.
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4 *Giving Athletes' the Illusion of Choice and Ownership over their Training*
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6 For Sally and for most of the other coaches we interviewed, integrating fun in warm-
7 ups or cool downs and occasionally in drills was also used as a way to give athletes a sense of
8 freedom and ownership over their training so that it was not just coach led, highly structured
9 hard work, which many coaches described as counterproductive to optimal training and
10 performance.
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18 I plan everything else so trying to give them a little ownership over that piece of one
19 day [...] Just to give them some ownership and break it up a little bit and also give
20 them an insight into what we do as coaches and build a better connection between
21 coach and athlete. (Bruno, women's team sport)
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28 These manufactured and fairly tightly circumscribed player led training times were also
29 perceived as beneficial to the development of positive relationships between players and also
30 between the players and the coach, which most coaches highlighted as paramount to team
31 performance and success in the long run. These specific statements about the importance and
32 benefits of giving athletes a sense of ownership and independence fit within a larger
33 increasingly popular rhetoric around athlete-centred teaching and coaching approaches
34 (Becker, 2009; Mageau & Vallerand, 2003; Nelson, et al. 2012).
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45 The tough balancing act of fun and highly structured serious hard work was
46 omnipresent throughout our interviews and something that all the coaches wrestled with and
47 handled in various creative ways. However, what was also evident was how little input
48 players actually had over their training. Furthermore, what little input they did have was
49 mostly circumscribed to trivial components of training or to team bonding activities outside
50 of training practices. Thus, while there might be a powerful rhetoric in place around the
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4 importance of player involvement, ownership and decision making, little is in fact put in
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6 place to favour more athlete ownership and involvement in the design of their training
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8 practices. With that said, while there is a clear disconnect between the powerful rhetoric
9
10 around holistic development and athlete-centred coaching and actual coaching practices, fun
11
12 does seem to be one concept which encourages athletes' active involvement in training even
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14 if trivial and symbolic.
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19 The disconnect between athlete-centred coaching rhetoric and actual coaching
20
21 practices can largely be explained by the fact that, as Denison et al., (2015) demonstrated,
22
23 most coaches are not currently equipped with the critical tools to problematize the effects of a
24
25 lifetime of sporting discipline. This was very evident in our interviews. For example, Steve
26
27 discussed how much his players struggled with 'letting loose' and 'just having fun' when
28
29 given free time in practice: "They struggle at the beginning. They get into it after a while but
30
31 we find that they are just as driven as we are as coaches. They all go to work on some serious
32
33 type things whether it is their finishing, whether it is their striking a ball over distance."
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35 Steve's quote, where he talks about how his athletes struggle to "just have fun" and how they
36
37 choose instead to work on their technical skills during their free athlete led practice time, is a
38
39 good example of the powerful effects of long term sporting discipline. Indeed, even when in
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41 theory his athletes were allowed to do what they wanted, they continued to engage in sporting
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43 practices that fit within the logic of performance sport and the norms of what being a 'good'
44
45 varsity athlete entails (i.e., being driven, self-motivated, and hardworking) supported by much
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47 of the sport psychology literature on athlete development (e.g., Mastrich, 2002; Smoll &
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49 Smith, 1987; Thompson, 1995, 2003).
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58 *Naturalizing Competitive Practices and Norms of Masculinity*
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4 While fun is put to specific strategic uses in training and outside of training to
5
6 naturalize dominant scientific training practices (e.g., periodization), fun is also
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8 instrumentalized within competitive settings albeit to a lesser extent. Indeed, for most
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10 coaches, competitions are in and of themselves fun. Therefore, coaches feel less of a
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12 responsibility to incorporate fun since fun happens ‘organically’ in competitive settings for
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14 most athletes who are ‘true’ competitors. As Harry (men’s team sport) put it:
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19 The guys at this level have been weeded out and the guys that don’t have fun doing
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21 that usually have not made it this far or have been cut or released or not made teams
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23 or not progressed. So, for the most part our guys have fun when they are competing
24
25 and winning.
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29 Athletes’ ability to have fun during competitions and in competitive settings was important to
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31 most coaches in our sample as it is tied to performance and success, but it was particularly
32
33 emphasized in some sports, which are both heavy contact and highly competitive: “The
34
35 foundation that you are building is around competition so you have to make sure that you
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37 have the right type of people, the type of young men who want to compete, who love
38
39 competing and have fun” (Fred, men’s team sport). As these quotes show, athletes’ ability to
40
41 have fun during competitions is tied to dominant understandings of mental toughness and
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43 masculinity (Pringle, 2009; Shogan, 1999) and to the making of the ‘good’ varsity athlete.
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45 Our interviews with varsity coaches supported Pringle’s (2009) work, which showed the
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47 mutually supportive relationship between the ongoing production of norms of masculinity as
48
49 competitive, driven and mentally and physically tough and the ongoing production of specific
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51 sporting pleasures tied to competition, overcoming bodily pain, rugged physicality and
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53 violence in rugby.
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4 Having discussed some of the tensions and struggles that coaches face in their
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6 attempts to reconcile ‘the fun mandate’ with current dominant disciplinary practices of
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8 performance sport, we next discuss how coaches work to overcome some of these tensions
9
10 and struggles. We specifically elaborate on how coaches do so through differentiating
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12 between what is just ‘silly fun’ and the ‘fun’ tied to performance and to the development of
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14 the successful varsity athlete.
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18 **Fun and the Psychological Benefits of Training: The Making of the Successful Varsity** 19 20 **Athlete** 21

22 *The Passionate Athlete* 23

24 The role of fun in athlete development and in the production of the ‘good’ varsity athlete was
25
26 one that really transpired in our interviews with varsity coaches. There were differences
27
28 amongst the coaches in the way they recruited fun depending on whether they coached males
29
30 or females or both and whether they coached team or individual sports. However, there were
31
32 also significant overlaps. One of them was the need and desire to work with passionate
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34 athletes. This imperative was expressed in most of our interviews: “So you have to have that
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36 passion for the game, the program, your teammates, your team, the way the program is run,
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38 your coaches and coaching staff and everything else. It’s very important if you look at it that
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40 way in terms of passion, enthusiasm” (Harry, men’s team sport).
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48 Passion and the imperative of being passionate about one’s sport as a varsity athlete
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50 get mobilized in training to overcome the monotony of repetitive skill work, which as
51
52 previously discussed, many coaches viewed as not fun but necessary to successful varsity
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54 athlete development: “So I always tell my girls, you have to love your sport unconditionally
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56 to do this [...] And so that means that they have to do all these things on a daily basis even if
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4 they hate it but it does get monotonous for sure” (Bruno, women’s team sport coach).
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6 Implicitly, if you have the ‘right’ makeup to be a successful varsity athlete (i.e., you are
7
8 passionate enough about your sport), you will be able to overcome or overlook the monotony
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10 of varsity sport skill training.
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13 *The Mentally Tough Athlete*

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16 Furthermore, some coaches take the relationship between passion and fun and being
17
18 the right kind of athlete to be successful in varsity sport a step further. They link athletes’
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20 ability to enjoy characteristically ‘boring’ aspects of varsity sport training to being a good
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22 varsity athlete and also being a good teammate. For example, Viola (women’s team sport)
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24 asserted:
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28 So those restart periods, it just hurts, their bodies hurt and it is not particularly fun but
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30 it’s about that sharing of the community, they are all experiencing it. And my
31
32 expectations of the veteran players are the role modelling of how to cope with those
33
34 situations. You can feel sorry for yourself and whine about it or you can go jump in
35
36 the ice bath together and find some enjoyment in that.
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41 Viola implied that a good varsity athlete with the right mental makeup and a good teammate
42
43 is not only able to overcome or push through the not fun aspects of varsity sport training such
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45 as gruelling preseason training, monotonous skill work, injuries and other similar challenges
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47 but that one is actually able to enjoy this process as well.
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51 Bruno and Viola’s quotes also demonstrate how fun/passion get mobilized to support
52
53 the construction of specific ideas of being a good varsity athlete and a good teammate, which
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55 in turn act to normalize effective varsity sporting practices and therefore ignore some of the
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57 effects of these effective dominant disciplinary sporting and coaching practices (e.g., the
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4 production of uncritical, coach dependent docile bodies). Within these two powerful
5
6 normalizing ideas of the good teammate and the good athlete, one can readily imagine how
7
8 difficult it can be for varsity athletes to voice any concerns or struggles they might be having
9
10 with any aspects of varsity sport training and competing. Fun/passion, therefore, can be said
11
12 to support the unproblematic reproduction of dominant disciplinary coaching practices in
13
14 varsity sport.
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19 *The Self-sacrificing and Self-effacing Athlete*
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21 While some of the coaches took these powerful connections between fun/passion and
22
23 being a good varsity athlete and teammate for granted, others actively worked to make these
24
25 explicit to their athletes. These coaches viewed these connections as an integral part of
26
27 successful varsity athlete development and of their role as a varsity coach. Fred (men's team
28
29 sport coach) encourages his athletes to think as follows: "My sacrifice is important and
30
31 although I hurt right now, I take a lot of pride in that I hurt for this, for my teammates and for
32
33 what we want to accomplish together." Fred further emphasized: "So I think that if you can
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35 make that link [between fun/passion and being a good teammate] for them it helps, it helps
36
37 them have more fun and it helps them get through those hard times without getting down."
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43 This rhetoric of self-sacrifice was particularly emphasized in heavy contact sports
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45 such as football:
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48 But to me, honestly, it is about that greater picture, the greater mission and you have
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50 to have a sense of personal satisfaction when you sacrifice for that mission. So if you
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52 are training to the point where you are puking and you are sick, if you believe that the
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54 mission is important then you can come to terms and rationalize the fact that you feel
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56 bad but that you have still helped our mission and the team. And it helps people have
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4 fun if they can adopt that mind-set. So much of this is having the right mind-set.

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7 (Fred)

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9 Aside from being an important aspect in terms of successful individual athlete and
10 skill development for varsity sport, passion and fun were also mobilized in the context of
11 team sports to develop group cohesion and homogeneity. As a number of sport psychologists
12 (Turman, 2003; Yukelson, 2011) have argued, there is a positive correlation between fun and
13 group cohesion and homogeneity and team performance and productivity. The coaches we
14 interviewed supported this view. For example, Viola (women's team sport coach) argued: "I
15 think that one of the keys to our success has been finding like-minded athletes who can define
16 fun in the same way."
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28 *The Competitive and Aggressive Athlete*

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31 Framed as the foundation and backbone of successful athlete and team development,
32 the art and love of competition is naturalized through the making of the good varsity athlete
33 and the good teammate. Reciprocally, the normalization of competition as fun secures
34 dominant disciplinary varsity training and competing practices as unproblematic. Indeed, as
35 Fred put it, the simple fact of "putting more competition into practice makes fun go up", then
36 coaches can adopt a 'laissez faire' attitude to fun since it will occur naturally through infusing
37 more competition into training.
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48 Additionally, the art and love of competition, something that should be natural for the
49 right kind of athletes, was also an attitude that many coaches worked hard at developing in
50 their athletes and viewed as the result of a process of development:
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53 [Both in the] off season and in season training we just surround them with the fact that
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55 competition is fun. So then when we compete more and more and that competition
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4 becomes more physical and aggressive it is still fun. We keep working and working at
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6 [that connection] and it is progressive but then too much of that [competition and
7
8 physical aggression] and people start getting beat up and nobody has fun when they
9
10 are hurting and beat up and the coach is saying let's hit each other again. (Fred)
11
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14 Fred described the love of competition as being on a spectrum. It is both something that
15
16 people are born with (i.e., they are wired that way), but also something that can be developed
17
18 through finding ways of infusing competition into training in innovative ways and over time.
19
20 The final end goal is that varsity athletes will eventually learn to have fun in the specific type
21
22 of aggressive and violent competition that is normalized in some sports and that will make the
23
24 team more successful. This is a good example of Foucault's (1978) productive understanding
25
26 of power. Indeed, discipline is so effective precisely because it does not simply repress
27
28 individuals. Rather, it is productive, it shapes and makes individuals and produces specific
29
30 forms of normative pleasures which further 'bind' people to their own identities (i.e., the
31
32 pleasure of fitting in within the norm, of being recognized or lauded by one's coach for being
33
34 a 'good teammate', etc.).
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41 As the various quotes from coaches show, normalizing dominant understandings of
42
43 what a good teammate are often connected to a very specific and strategic definition of fun
44
45 linked to a sense of personal satisfaction and pride that comes from hard work and self-
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47 discipline (Smith-Maguire, 2008) and performing well as an athlete and as a teammate. This
48
49 specific definition of fun is, therefore, not process oriented or linked to finding enjoyment in
50
51 the sporting activity itself during actual training or competing (Jackson, 1996, 2000; Jackson
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53 & Csikszentmihaly, 1999; Lloyd & Smith, 2006), but is linked more to a sense of purpose and
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55 achievement tied to the successful realization of specific individual and team goals. It could
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4 be argued that this specific definition of fun is linked to normative pleasures of being a good
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6 teammate and athlete and, therefore, that it has the potential to produce athlete docility.
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9 *The Gendering of Fun*

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11 While the privileging of a learned fun tied to the successful development of the
12
13 competitive athlete over other forms of fun was evident in our interviews, we were also struck
14
15 by the highly gendered nature of fun. For example, fun in the physical battling and in pushing
16
17 one's body through pain to be successful was especially prominent in the sports of men's ice
18
19 hockey and football. Of course the strategic instrumentalization of fun in connection with
20
21 physical battling and violence and overcoming pain is a result of the very nature and demands
22
23 of these heavy contact sports. Despite the fact that we did not interview the women's ice-
24
25 hockey coach, it is impossible to disregard how this specific instrumentalization of fun
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27 coincides with dominant discourses of masculinity as being aggressive, risk taking and
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29 physically and mentally tough (Laurendeau, 2008; Messner, 1990; Pringle, 2009; Pringle &
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31 Markula, 2005).
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38 The gendering of fun and its role in the reproduction of norms of masculinity and
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40 femininity was especially evident in talking with the varsity coaches who coached both
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42 female and male athletes:
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45 Men are a little bit more cutthroat. Women it's more the fact that they feel that they
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47 belong to something. They want to be there because they are friends and so that keeps
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49 them motivated a little bit longer. However, at the higher levels it changes and it
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51 becomes very cutthroat for women as well. Although they still have that sense of
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53 wanting to belong whereas men are a little bit more like they would rip your head off
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55 to win. I wouldn't say that they don't enjoy fun the same way but it is hard, I am
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4 trying to figure out the proper words to use. (Will, men and women’s individual sport
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6 coach)
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9 As the above excerpt shows, fun and sporting motivation for male athletes is dominantly
10 produced as purposeful, goal oriented and tied to winning and aggressively pursuing
11 performance and success, whereas for females, the production of fun is also largely tied to
12 team bonding and social interactions. Will’s perception of gendered differences in fun and
13 motivation also impacted the way he coached his male athletes and female athletes in
14 different ways. For example, while he had no qualms yelling at his male athletes across the
15 room, he would take care not to do so with his female athletes because he perceived this way
16 of correcting errors negatively affected his female athletes’ performances. This shows how
17 dominant gendered discourses are mobilized around the idea of fun and motivation within
18 varsity sporting contexts, but also reciprocally how widespread societal gendered discourses
19 get reproduced through fun in varsity sport and varsity sporting and coaching practices.
20
21 ‘Gendered’ fun thus plays a key role in upholding gendered power relations and inequalities
22 both in sport and in wider society. These research findings echo the work of feminist
23 researchers (Ahmed, 2004; Cruikshank, 1993; Fraser & Greco, 2005; Hopkins et al., 2009)
24 who highlighted the instrumental role that pleasures and emotions have historically played in
25 the reproduction of dominant gender relations.
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28 *The Well-rounded Athlete*

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30 Our interviews highlighted another important aspect of varsity athlete development:
31 the holistic development of the student-athlete. Indeed, many coaches expressed the idea that
32 it was important for them not only to develop successful student athletes but also to develop
33 specific kinds of people who are autonomous, self-motivated, respectful, appreciative and
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4 aware and open to other cultures. We found this interesting because based on this description,
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6 it would appear that coaches strive to create non-docile athletes (Foucault, 1991), that is
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8 athletes who are the opposite of coach dependant, unreflective, mechanistic bodies: “So for
9
10 example, I try to take them to different parts of Canada so they can get a sense of the culture
11
12 and community and when we go to those places we try and see all the touristy things and try
13
14 and give them a sense of their nation” (Bruno, women’s team sport coach). However, as our
15
16 interviews with coaches also showed, the actual practices of varsity sport tied to fun and
17
18 holistic coaching that the coaches put in place are most often anything but conducive to
19
20 producing critical athletes capable of having shared input and ownership over their training.
21
22 Indeed, fun and holistic athlete development are mainly put in practice through team bonding
23
24 activities outside of the serious work of training and becoming a successful varsity athlete
25
26 such as travelling and sightseeing. Moreover, some of the coaches discussed the importance
27
28 of developing people who will go on to be successful in their personal and professional lives
29
30 when their varsity sporting careers are over. As Bruno expressed: “I view varsity sport as a
31
32 good training ground for their professional careers and I try and teach them how to behave.”
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34 These quotes reflect the importance of holistic athlete development in varsity sport, but also
35
36 of dominant ideas about sport as being fundamentally character building and socio-positive.
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46 Some of the coaches found ways of practicing holistic development and fun in varsity
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48 sport and to conciliate these with the imperative of competition and performance relatively
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50 easy. However, some of the coaches in our sample expressed difficulty in the effective
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52 management of both ‘mandates’ of varsity sport. Will for example, expressed his sense of
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54 frustration with coaching evaluations and with the disconnect he perceived between what
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4 ‘really’ matters (i.e., success and winning) and what matters ‘rhetorically’ and ‘theoretically’
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7 (i.e., fun and the holistic development of the student athlete):

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9 Well you are asking kids if they are having fun but you are not asking them whether
10 they were successful. As coaches, we are measured on the fact that we are successful.
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12 So in those evaluations, it is not asking were you successful, did you learn something
13
14 or did you achieve your goals. You are asking evaluations to evaluate what we are not
15
16 actually asking the coaches to do.
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21 Will also expressed his frustration with the lack of financial and educational resources to
22
23 practice fun and holistic development: “For a sport coach to go look up something online and
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25 find something fun [to do at practice] at a high level sport, you are not going to find
26
27 anything.” These quotes also again highlight the lack of any formalized coaching education
28
29 about fun/enjoyment despite its stated importance and the disconnect between athlete-centred
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31 coaching rhetoric and actual coaching practices.
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36 We next conclude by discussing the implications of our findings and make
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38 recommendations for the development of more ethical and effective coaching practices
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40 related to fun in performance sporting contexts.
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43 **Conclusion**

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45 In this study, we sought to develop a better understanding of how coaches currently
46
47 think about fun as part of their understanding of how to coach and examined how the
48
49 psychological construct of fun endorsed dominant coaching practices. Our interviews with
50
51 coaches showed that fun is currently largely instrumentalized by coaches to overcome the
52
53 ‘grind’ of physical skill training as well as to develop and naturalize certain specific
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55 normative psychological traits and skills in athletes (i.e., being obedient, uncritical, self-
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4 sacrificing and self-effacing, mentally tough, competitive and aggressive). As a result of these
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6 uses of fun, dominant disciplinary training practices and their problematic effects go
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8 unproblematized and unchanged while leading coaches to believe that they are coaching
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10 differently, more positively and ethically. Some of the most problematic effects of fun
11
12 evidenced in our study included the naturalization of dominant docility-producing training
13
14 practices as ‘best coaching practices’, the naturalization of dominant and limiting normative
15
16 constructs of the good athlete and teammate and of problematic gendered norms of
17
18 masculinity and femininity. All of these uses of fun contribute to hindering the potential for
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20 critique, change and innovation in coaching as well as the development of more effective and
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22 ethical training and athlete development practices in performance sporting contexts.
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29 Our study’s findings, therefore, support the previous work of Foucauldian coaching
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31 scholars who have highlighted the problematic disciplinary legacy of high-performance sport
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33 and have also questioned the capacity of current coaching and coach education frameworks
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35 (e.g., LTAD) to address the problematic effects of this legacy for coaches, athletes and the
36
37 coaching profession at large despite best intentions (Denison & Avner, 2011; Denison et al.,
38
39 2015; Avner et al., 2017). Indeed, as our interviews showed, coaches did not seem to be able
40
41 to problematize their use of fun and its role in the unproblematic reproduction of dominant
42
43 disciplinary training practices. This is largely due to the dominance of certain knowledges
44
45 like sport psychology and the sport sciences in shaping coaches’ understandings and practices
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47 of effective training and athlete development. These knowledges, while useful and
48
49 productive, do not equip coaches with the necessary critical tools to problematize fun.
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55 However, this does not mean that coaches cannot effect positive change. To start,
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57 given the current problematic disciplinary and normalizing uses of fun outlined in this study,
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4 coaches could refrain from automatic and uncritical mentions of fun when they talk about
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6 training and competing with their athletes. Although this would not equip coaches with the
7
8 critical tools to problematize their practices, it would nonetheless be a positive first step in
9
10 terms of re-opening a space for reflection, critique, creativity and change for both coaches and
11
12 athletes in performance contexts. Secondly, we believe it is critical to integrate Foucauldian
13
14 informed content geared towards developing ‘problematization’ as a key coaching
15
16 competency in coach education frameworks. This would imply that coach educators be
17
18 trained in Foucauldian thought so that they may, in turn, help coaches critically interrogate
19
20 taken for granted ‘best coaching practices’ and the ways they recruit fun to support these
21
22 same practices. Coach educators and coaches could start with some of the following questions
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24 to guide their problematization of training and athlete development practices related to fun:
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- 31 1) What coaching and sporting knowledges have shaped my understanding and my
32 practices related to fun?
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- 35 2) What understandings of the body, training and performance do I promote through
36 my coaching practices related to fun? How might this be problematic? What ways
37 of understanding the body, training and performance might be obscured or
38 marginalized as a result of my practices?
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- 45 3) What understandings of the self and others do I promote through my coaching
46 practices related to fun? How might this be problematic? What ways of
47 understanding the self and others might be obscured or marginalized as a result of
48 my practices?
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55 Integrating such critical questions would imply making changes to national coach
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57 development curricula, which is presently almost exclusively informed by the sport sciences
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4 (e.g., NCCP one, two, three). These critical questions also point to the need to re-politicize
5
6 the production of fun and of coaching knowledge at large. This would allow, we believe for
7
8 greater ethical transformative possibilities both for the subjects of knowledge (the coaches
9
10 and the athletes) and the object of knowledge (sport coaching).
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