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“Get tough!”: A case study on the development of the sport ethic in youth lacrosse

by

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A plan B master’s project in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
MASTER OF HEALTH AND HUMAN MOVEMENT

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### Abstract

While participation in youth sport is often linked with positive psychosocial and physical outcomes (Holt et al., 2017), this context can also cultivate ideals that lead to the development of unethical beliefs as well as unsafe sport practices (Al-Yaarbi & Kavussanu, 2017). The sport ethic is described as the deviant overconformity by an athlete to fit societal expectations of a sport's high-performance culture (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). Strong beliefs in the sport ethic can lead to moral disengagement, antisocial behavior, and viewing sport like warfare (Shields, Funk, & Bredemeier, 2015). Although the sport ethic has been examined in competitive adult sport (Coakley, 2015), the development of this belief system among youth remains relatively unexplored. Utilizing Bronfenbrenner's (1986) ecological systems theory of development, the present study employed a case study approach to investigate the cultivation of the sport ethic in a recreational youth lacrosse team over the course of a four-month competitive season. Data were collected through 109 hours of naturalistic observation (during seven games and 27 practice sessions) and semi-structured interviews with four athletes and one parent. Data were analyzed using a general thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Key themes from the microsystem level (i.e., athletes, parents, peers, coaches) highlight that an overemphasis on masculinity, specialization, and sacrifice may predispose athletes to internalize deviant ideals of the sport ethic, even if one's mesosystem (i.e., the sport's organization) discourages such behavior. Findings draw attention to the social factors (e.g., promoting lacrosse as a "man's game" or encouraging violent play) in youth sporting contexts that may impact the development of unsafe practices (e.g., playing through injury, hurting opponents), and provide practical implications for youth sport coaches, parents, and athletes by creating an environment where safe sport practices are encouraged.

## Introduction

Organized sport in the United States is an extremely popular activity for today's youth, with current estimates of 45 million children and adolescents participating annually (Merkel, 2013). Sport can be utilized as a platform to help youth develop appropriate social, cognitive, and physical skills (Holt, Neely, Slater, Camiré, Côté, Fraser-Thomas, MacDonald, Strachan, & Tammiminen, 2017). Although organized sport is an activity that can promote many desirable behavior outcomes, its competitive nature may also lead to negative behaviors and undesirable byproducts (Neely, McHugh, Dunn, & Holt, 2017). Some of the potential negative consequences associated with youth sport are well documented, ranging from bullying and antisocial behaviors to risk-taking behaviors (e.g., intentionally breaking rules, using performance-enhancing drugs) as well as moral disengagement (e.g., convincing the self that ethical standards do not apply to oneself in a particular context; Al-Yaarbi & Kavussanu, 2017; Kavussanu, Stanger, & Boardley, 2013). These adverse outcomes of sport participation may be derived in part from a sport culture that is deeply rooted in a 'winning at all costs' mindset.

Considering the cultural landscape of the competitive sport environment, youth are often exposed to professional athletes being praised for playing through injury or treating sport like warfare (Wilson, 2013). Children's beliefs are malleable, and as children observe these suggestive overtones of sport, they are also more likely to adhere to this collection of norms, which have become known as the sport ethic. The sport ethic is described as deviant overconformity to fit societal norms of a high-performance sport culture (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). When an individual believes in the sport ethic, the ideals of a specific sport context becomes the most integrated aspect of an athlete's identity, promoting extreme or unhealthy actions to be judged as successful within a competitive context (Coakley, 2015). The sport ethic,

which can be thought of as a sport-specific code of conduct, is broken down into four primary categories: sacrifice, seeking distinction, taking risks, and challenging limits, all of which encourage athletes go to extreme lengths to become the best at their respective sport (Table 1; Hughes & Coakley, 1991). Behaviors typically associated with the sport ethic include (but are not limited to) avoiding medical attention, risking injury for winning, playing through pain, treating opponents inhumanely, and valuing winning as the most important outcome (Kavussanu, Boardley, Sagar, & Ring, 2013; Shields, LaVoi, Bredemeier, & Power, 2007). The sport ethic is existent in most sports, although overdeviant behaviors are typically more frequent in more violent sports with high levels of contact, such as lacrosse (Hughes & Coakley, 1991).

**Table 1.** The Sport Ethic (Hughes & Coakley, 1991)

<b>Ideals</b>	<b>Brief Description</b>
Being an athlete involves making sacrifices for The Game.	To prove that they care about a sport, an athlete must make a commitment to the team, meet the demands of other athletes, and sacrifice to stay involved.
Being an athlete involves striving for distinction.	True athletes seek to improve, to get better, to come closer to perfection. This is because "real" athletes are a special group trying to reach the top and push limits to exceed others.
Being an athlete involves accepting risks and playing through pain.	An athlete does not give in to pressure, pain or fear. In addition to overcoming physical challenges, an athlete must have moral courage to withstand stress and mental pressures.
Being an athlete involves refusing to accept limits in the pursuit of possibilities.	An athlete does not accept a situation without trying to change it, overcome it, and try to pursue a goal that seems "beyond normal limits".

Researchers have studied the sport ethic and its negative repercussions on elite-level athletes; however, little research has explored the foundation of this overconformity to sport norms in youth athletes. Past research has attempted to investigate the formation of the sport ethic within youth sport, finding that parents encouraged athletes to return early from injury (Brewer & Tripp, 2005). Unfortunately, this study relied on a small sample size and lacked adequate statistical power. Similarly, other studies have explored youth athletes' beliefs in the

sport ethic, but only considered the influences of athletes and their peers (Shipherd, 2010), rather than their entire social environment.

Understanding that the growth of beliefs in sport is often shaped by one's social surroundings (Strachan, McHugh, & Mason, 2018), it is likely that the sport ethic is fostered by multiple spheres of influence to which child is exposed during their development in sport. Kohlberg (1963) conceptualized that moral and ethical belief systems develop across six stages, in which young adolescents rely on their environment to gain a sense of right and wrong, often using peers, parents, and influential figures (e.g., coaches, teachers, administrators) as primary sources of information. As youth develop, they often shape their morality and societal beliefs to fit the 'norm' (Kohlberg, 1973). Therefore, if sport is introduced as a context that stresses the deviant beliefs of the sport ethic, rather than safe and committed participation, children may find it essential to follow this belief system to become successful.

Due to the apparent relation between one's localized environment and their beliefs, the development of the sport ethic can be explored utilizing an ecological approach. According to the ecological systems theory of human development, individuals interact with multiple spheres of influences that mold views, cultural beliefs, and morals (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Individuals exist nested within five levels of influence: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem, each contributing unique factors to one's behavioral development (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). For the present study, the development of the sport ethic was examined at the most proximal levels of influence, taking parents, peers, and coaches, as well as the athlete's organization into account (i.e., the *microsystem, mesosystem, and exosystem*; see Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In sport, the microsystem can be viewed as any individual who is having bi-directional interactions with the athlete, such as coaches, parents, and peers

(O'Rourke, Smith, Smoll, & Cumming, 2014). Alternatively, the mesosystem is the interaction between sources within the microsystem. The exosystem encapsulates these two systems, providing the organization or prominent influences in which these individuals exist (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

In youth sport, coaches can have significant impacts on the environment in which an activity takes place as well as the overall attitudes of the athletes. Coaches play a paramount role in an athlete's engagement with sport, specifically in how they communicate and evaluate sport with athletes (Erickson, Côté, Hollenstein, & Deakin, 2011; Smith & Smoll, 2007). In previous literature, coaches who embodied the sport ethic encouraged athletes to practice unethical eating and training habits, as well as foul play, to gain competitive edges over their opponents (Coker-Cranney & Reel, 2015). In addition, coaches who heavily stress winning can create an environment where athletes believe that elite-level sport involves extreme physical and mental sacrifices (Ommundsen, Roberts, & Kavussanu, 1998; Peláez, Aulls, & Bacon, 2016).

Likewise, parents are often a primary source of information for their children (Eccles & Harold, 1991). Although many parents encourage sport participation with good intentions, their prior sport experience and beliefs may cause a disconnect between what they state that they want their children to receive from sport compared to what their behaviors suggest (Dorsch, Smith, Wilson, & McDonough 2015). Moreover, parents typically have warm intentions, but behaviors such as shouting or encouraging foul play during competitive sports may encourage athletes to behave similarly (Dorsch, Smith, & McDonough, 2009). Considering the behaviors of adults is critical in the development of belief systems, especially in inherently negative ones such as the sport ethic.

Adults play an integral role in the creation of youth sport contexts, peer relationships also can influence a child's beliefs about sport. Innately, children seek out peers with similar interests and will often differentiate from their standard beliefs to fit in (Stryker & Burk, 2000). For example, individuals will tailor social identities within groups, even if this identity does not directly align with one's personal beliefs (Evans, McLaren, Budziszewski, & Gilchrist, 2018). In sport, antisocial behaviors become more prevalent with higher levels of team identification (Benson & Bruner, 2018); thus, if multiple members of a team believe in the sport ethic, these beliefs could be disseminated throughout the team.

While many factors appear to be linked to the sport ethic, there is a need to better understand how this belief system develops in young athletes. The sport ethic leads to negative behaviors that can impact not only the children playing sport at youth levels, but can be detrimental to athletes of all ages (Boardley & Kavussanu, 2010). If the development of sport ethic and underlying components of this belief system can be identified, safety and enjoyment in this context could be enhanced by improving the way that sport is framed within youth athletes. An ecological approach, in which athletes, coaches, parents, and peers are examined more closely may form a more comprehensive picture of what influences this belief system in youth sport, as each source of information can exert unique influences on individuals (e.g., different coaches, parents, peers). Thus, the purpose of the current study was to investigate a single lacrosse organization to understand localized, social factors that contribute to the development of the sport ethic in youth sport contexts.

## **Method**

### **Design**

An instrumental case study approach (Yin, 2009) was utilized to explore this group in its natural context. Aligned with Yin's (2009) recommendations, the participating team in the study



was not unique, but represented a single bounded case within a closed time-frame in which generalizability could be derived (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). An interpretivist paradigm was employed to understand how the study's participants made sense of their reality and to derive meanings from these interpretations to explain their behaviors (Atkinson, 2012). As such, an emphasis was placed on collecting data that represented participant viewpoints through interviews and observations, which were then thematically analyzed.

### **Context**

The current study was designed to examine individuals within a single youth lacrosse team. The choice to examine a male contact sport, such as lacrosse, was due to the high prevalence of injury and associated unethical behaviors often exhibited by parents, athletes, and coaches (Nixon, 1996; Robidoux, 2002). In the Rocky Mountain region of the United States, youth lacrosse is growing in popularity; consistent with this growth, parents and athletes are increasingly emphasizing competitiveness and early sport specialization, leading to occasional instances of violence and a 'win at all costs' mentality (Anderson, 2018; Franchuk, 2013). Moreover, DeHaven and Litner (1986) examined 4,551 high school injuries and male athletes accounted for 80 percent of these cases, with lacrosse reporting significantly higher than average rates. Additionally, men's lacrosse yields the third highest amount of injuries due to contact, behind football and ice hockey (Fraser et al., 2017). Thus, lacrosse served as a suitable sport to study the sport ethic, given the physicality and aggression involved in the context.

### **Participants**

Thirty-five participants were involved in the current study. Specifically, athletes ( $n = 18$ ), coaches ( $n = 2$ ), and parents ( $n = 15$ ) from a recreational lacrosse team located in the Rocky Mountain region of the United States were recruited to participate in the research. Due to the

location of the team, competitions sometimes involved travel of up to 1-2 hours in each direction. The team was embedded in an organization that stressed skill and social development through participation. Athletes were between 11-13 years of age and 17 athletes (94.4%) identified as White or Caucasian, while one participant identified as Asian American (5.6%). Of the two coaches, the head coach had former education in lacrosse coaching and was a Division I NCAA athlete, while the assistant coach was a volunteer parent with no background in the sport.

The team in the present study is a member of a state-wide non-profit group that has an overarching mission of developing athletes and the sport, while striving for fairness and positive experiences to encourage long-term participation. The league stresses the growth of players and the sport in a non-threatening environment, discouraging parents, coaches, and athletes from engaging in poor sportsmanship (e.g., yelling at athletes or referees, rough play, etc.). The organization offers formal coach education to interested coaches and adheres to United States Lacrosse youth by-laws (US Lacrosse, 2016). In total, there are over 100 teams that participate in this league. The league provides handbooks and online resources to parents and coaches prior to the season stressing the importance of creating a comfortable youth sport context.

### **Role of the researcher**

The current study was led by the primary researcher, who is a graduate student with previous competitive youth sport experience. The primary researcher had no previous experience in lacrosse, but drew upon experiences in similar contact sports (e.g., football) where he participated until high school and served as a junior high assistant coach for three years. When drawing upon relevant experiences as an athlete, the primary researcher recognizes that the sport ethic was overemphasized during his own sport participation, often engaging in risk-taking behaviors and valuing winning above all else. As a coach and researcher, the primary researcher

views sport as a context that should serve as a vehicle that drives youth to become better people, emphasizing the process (e.g., skill development and social interactions) over the outcome (e.g., winning). Although the primary researcher attempted to collect data to accurately represent the context, it is likely that pre-existing beliefs and experiences may have impacted how data or knowledge was understood and interpreted.

### **Procedures**

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was granted prior to participant recruitment. Initially, the primary researcher attended a meeting with the head coach and a league administrator to introduce the study. After receiving buy-in from the head coach and administrator, the study was introduced to parents, athletes, and coaches at the beginning of the team's first practice session of the season. Signed consent forms were collected during the subsequent practice session and data collection began. For taking part in the study, each participant was compensated with a \$20 gift card at the end of the season. Participants who chose to partake in an optional interview at the end of the season received an additional \$20 gift card.

### **Data Collection**

In accordance with recommended case study approaches and to triangulate findings to accurately portray this context, data were collected through: (a) naturalistic observations, (b) field notes, and (c) semi-structured interviews (Creswell, 1998). Over the course of a four-month competitive season, the primary researcher and an undergraduate research assistant conducted observations and interviews, and recorded field notes of parents, coaches, and athletes from the team. Practice sessions ( $n = 27$ ) were twice a week, with a game ( $n = 7$ ) occurring bi-weekly. Throughout the season, informal conversations with participants,

observations, and field notes occurred, with interviews being conducted in the final week of the season.

**Naturalistic Observations.** This method of data collection was conducted by two members of the research team, the primary researcher and an undergraduate research assistant, allowing for multiple perspectives to be collected during both practices and games. During the observational phase, the goal was to record group interactions and behaviors while not disrupting the environment (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Observations were recorded using cell phones and portable audio recorders. Furthermore, observations served as a process through which to study the social environment, with a focus on the group's communication and behavior. Data collected were used to inform subsequent observations as well as the development of the semi-structured interview guide (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002). Throughout the season, the research team observed 27 separate 90-minute practice sessions as well as seven two-hour games. All sessions were attended by both an undergraduate research assistant and the primary researcher, who collectively compiled 109 hours of observations.

**Field Notes.** Written documents of observations, informal conversations, and descriptions of contextual information were recorded in field notebooks by both the primary researcher and an undergraduate research assistant. In line with prior case studies (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2017; Rohde, 2012), field notes served as an area in which to reflect or expand on observations to make later interpretation easier for the research team. The researchers completed field notes in their car after practice and reflected upon the session for 24 hours and reread the notes for accuracy. Then, the notes were recorded on an audio recording device to be transcribed for data analysis. Field notes resulted in 107 total pages of handwritten data, which when dictated into audio format was 2.8 hours long.

**Semi-Structured Interviews.** Interviews occurred at the end of the season and the semi-structured interview protocol was based upon the overarching research question (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). Interview guides were also informed in an iterative manner by observational data that were collected throughout season. Interviews were viewed as “social activities where two or more persons actively engage in embodied talk, jointly constructing knowledge about themselves as they interact over time” (Smith & Sparkes, 2016, p. 103). The interview process was explained to the team, and all athletes and parents were invited to participate. The coaches were also invited, but declined the opportunity. In total, four athletes and one parent elected to participate in interviews that occurred in the final week of the season. Athlete interviews ranged in length from 6.5 to 18.8 minutes ( $M = 14.1$ ), while the one parent interview was 47.7 minutes in length. These interviews were held on-site near the practice field and were moderated by the primary author, while an undergraduate researcher assistant was present to interject or ask probing questions when necessary.

The semi-structured interview guide was initially developed using Hughes and Coakley’s (1991) conceptualization of the sport ethic, but was continually revised throughout the data collection process to integrate novel themes as they were identified. The athlete interview guide included four overarching questions: (a) Do you ever feel pressure to quit other sports or sacrifice other activities to be successful in lacrosse?; (b) What is the most important aspect of lacrosse to you?; (c) Have you ever risked your mental or physical health for lacrosse? (i.e., playing through injury or overtraining); and (d) What do you think is possible for your lacrosse career and what do you think it will take to make it there? The parent interview guide followed a similar structure but interview questions were adapted to a sport parenting perspective (e.g., How important is it to you that your child plays lacrosse?). Prior to asking these four main interview

questions, the primary researcher asked general questions (e.g., general demographics, experience in the sport, things they enjoyed about lacrosse) and integrated self-disclosing statements to make participants feel comfortable, using shared experiences from the season to transition into more serious topics (Elmir, Schmied, Jackson, & Wilkes, 2011; Peters, Jackson, & Rudge, 2008).

### **Data Analysis**

All data (field notes, observation audio, semi-structured interviews) were transcribed verbatim by an undergraduate research assistant. Transcripts were then checked by the primary researcher and an undergraduate research assistant for accuracy by listening to the audio or comparing the notes to the written transcripts. During this process, any identifying information was replaced with pseudonyms. The transcripts were then independently thematically analyzed in QSR nVivo by both the primary researcher and an undergraduate research assistant. By having multiple members of the research team examine differing forms of data, multiple perspectives were considered; as such, the present study attempted to provide a holistic and accurate representation of the observed case (Zartler, 2010).

Thematic analysis was an iterative process throughout the season, meaning that as transcripts were completed, they were then analyzed prior to the upcoming sessions (Braun, Clarke, & Weate, 2016). This method provided the research team an opportunity to identify themes of significance during the season to provide direction for observations (e.g., constant comparison; see Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six step approach: (1) immersion in data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. The primary researcher and an undergraduate researcher each immersed themselves in the data (i.e.,

read through data), then coded separately. By immersing oneself in the data, researchers were able to develop richer accounts and understandings within the data (Clarke & Braun, 2013). Also, by utilizing dual independent coding, data was not examined under one individual's lens, so themes represent multiple perspectives.

The researchers compared their independently coded documents to develop initial themes. Any discrepancies were discussed and if consensus could not be reached, the primary researcher's advisor served as mediator to challenge assumptions and interpretations (i.e., critical friend; Smith & McGannon, 2017). After this, data were coded again based on the new coding protocol. Once this second round of coding was complete, the primary researcher and an undergraduate researcher identified first-order themes, clustered them based on similarity, and then grouped them into four overarching components with the sport ethic conceptualization in mind (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Utilizing Creswell and Plano Clark's (2007) guidelines on using inductive and deductive reasoning in qualitative research, the present study recognized both methods of knowledge generation at different portions of research process. Given the exploratory nature of data collection and subsequent analyses, initial theme generation was inductive, guided by observations, and initial data analysis was derived from information collected from the experiences of the participants (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005). Deductive reasoning was then utilized when integrating the identified themes within the extant theoretical foundations of the sport ethic and the ecological systems theory.

### **Quality Considerations**

To ensure quality of this case study, Sparkes and Smith's (2009) recommendations for conducting quality research were followed throughout the data collection and analysis processes.

Interviews, observational recordings, and field notes were in line with the mission of the initial research question, while data were collected in an ethical manner. Rapport and trust were established early in the season with athletes and parents by building personal relationships with participants. These personal relationships were strengthened by engaging in dialogue with athletes prior to practice and attempting to make personal connections outside of that environment with participants. Moreover, the research team would assist the coaching staff with field setup and cleaning after practice. Although efforts were made to build rapport, it is important to note that the coaches involved in the study chose not to participate in follow-up interviews or a member-reflection process due to findings that they found alarming. Additionally, this study utilized naturalistic knowledge from parents, athletes, and coaches engaged in a lacrosse context while integrating the unique perspectives of the entire research team throughout the analysis process. By collecting data in a way that attempted to accurately depict this context, the findings presented are intended to be generalizable in hopes that this case study may be able to be utilized in other sport or situational environments (Smith, 2018).

## **Results**

Throughout the data analysis process, participants discussed 89 specific themes related to their experiences in youth lacrosse. These themes were categorized into 10 subcategories which were then grouped based upon where each fit in the original sport ethic conceptualization (Figure 1; Hughes & Coakley, 1991). The four overarching components are: (a) making sacrifices for *The Game*; (b) striving for distinction; (c) accepting risks and playing through pain; and (d) refusing to accept limits in the pursuit of possibilities. In line with the research goals, the pre-existing sport ethic component will be briefly described with subsequent headings discussing the pertinent findings that may predispose athletes to overconform to this belief system. It is



important to note that due to the four components creating a single belief system, the presented themes will likely have similarities, but each is introduced with adequate depth to provide the unique contribution it brings to this body of literature.

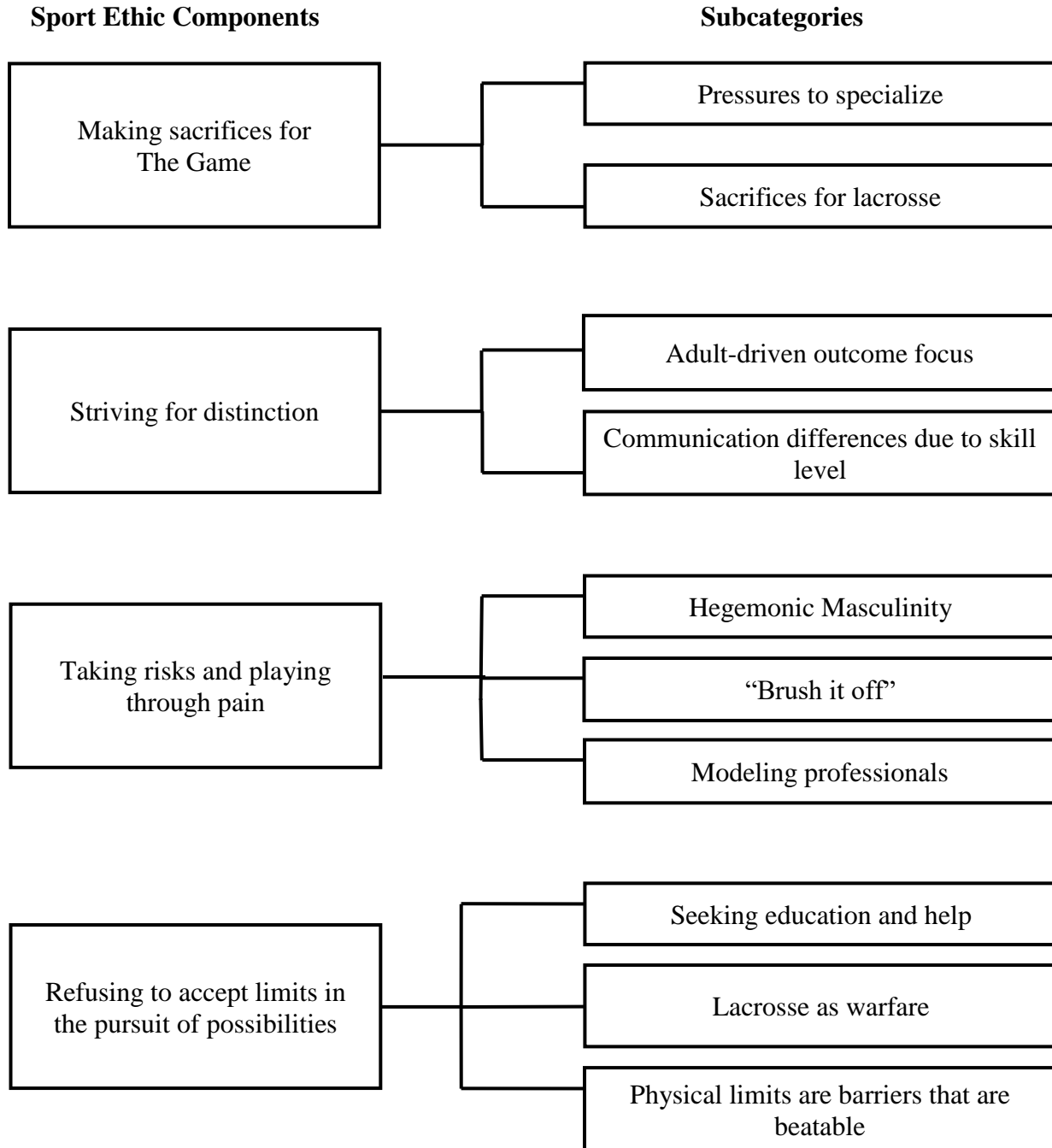


Figure 1. The original sport ethic conceptualization (Hughes & Coakley, 1991) with the identified subcategories from the present study.

**Making Sacrifices for The Game**

This component of the sport ethic suggests that successful athletes value their sport more than all else. Moreover, it states that athletes should show their dedication to the game by

displaying an undying commitment to their sport and showing exclusivity in their participation (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). In the present case and in line with this belief, individuals highlighted the pressures to specialize as well as the physical, mental, and financial sacrifices for lacrosse.

**Pressures to specialize.** Coaches, athletes, and parents encouraged specialization to enhance skill development, as well as to have an elevated chance to reach elite-levels of competition. Coaches in this context communicated differently with athletes who were specialized in the sport, often providing more feedback which frequently resulted in better performances and increased playing time. Specifically, coaches made it clear early in the season that athletes who were participating in both lacrosse and football would not receive as much playing time during games, due to them often showing up to practice late. Parents shared this same view of other athletes who would show up late to practice directly from another sport. A parent said, “If you’re doing two sports, you’re coming five minutes late to this practice and you can’t come into this practice and give it your all if you just did that at your other sport.”

Parents also promoted specialization in sport to attract attention from collegiate programs. One parent noted, “My son is a lacrosse player 12 months of the year... I want him to be successful and he made his intentions clear about playing in college. We are going to do everything we can to make that happen.” In addition, a parent justified specialization as a way to make sure her son does not get burned out from overtraining in multiple sports, “I mean we tried a couple of other sports, like football, and he was just run ragged. Some of these kids they don’t play well in the fall because they are playing other sports right now... They are just exhausted.” Athletes often followed the adults’ opinions in terms of specialization, believing that the only way to be successful is to train for one sport year-round. One athlete stated, “I watched the

[Name of local University] and saw that those guys are working all the time... They mean business, so do I now.” Although all of the participants had unique reasons for being specialized in lacrosse, whether that be to avoid burnout or to become elite, it often seemed that this was stressed as a necessity.

**Sacrifices for lacrosse.** Participants described that they made many difficult but necessary physical, mental, and financial sacrifices in order to succeed in lacrosse. Specifically, parents were often the main source of transportation, financial, and social support. A parent stated the following about the sacrifices that are made to facilitate their child’s participation: “I didn’t know originally what I signed up for... I drive him to every game, tournament, and practice... I stay and watch. I’d say it combines for about 20 hours a week.” Additionally, parents understand that lacrosse is expensive, but see it as a necessity for their child to have positive experiences in sport. As one parent noted, “His equipment is expensive... New sticks every year and the best headgear to ensure safety... This is on top of the annual yearly lacrosse fee, a membership for your organization, and fees for team-building activities... It adds up.” Athletes also felt the need to sacrifice for lacrosse. In line with the specialization theme, athletes in this group often did not participate in other extracurricular activities to improve in lacrosse.

As such, athletes encouraged other teammates to sacrifice themselves physically for the good of the team. One athlete stated, “I would be upset if someone didn’t play because of like I don’t know, twisted ankle... Or asked to be taken out because they were tired”. Athletes also indicated a struggle with maintaining a social life with lacrosse occurring all year round. One athlete stated, “I hung out with our goalie a few times, but that’s pretty much it... We don’t have the time.” The head coach viewed these sacrifices as a normal component that athletes at this age group should make if they want to be successful. Notably, the head coach said in passing to the

research team that, “These kids aren’t willing to put in 100 percent effort into the game anymore... They stay up playing Fortnite instead of getting sleep before games or practices. They aren’t willing to give up things like video games.”

### **Striving for Distinction**

An athlete striving for distinction is often associated with individuals who are focused solely on becoming perfect and do not view losing as an option. Typically, these individuals view sport as an arena to showcase their superiority through winning (Coakley, 2015). Aligned with this component of the sport ethic, participants discussed valuing winning (outcome orientation) above all else and altering communication with athletes based on skill level.

**Adult-driven outcome focus.** Although the team and organization officially stated a focus on skill development, the research team observed a great deal of emphasis on “winning at all costs.” Parents, coaches, and athletes alike justified winning as a representation of success and development of adequate physical skills, while not valuing individual improvements. For example, before each practice and game, the head coach had the athletes huddle up and say, “one, two, three, WIN”, emphasizing that the main mission of practice or competition was victory above all else. In addition, coaches and parents often praised goals or point saving plays, but often neglected individual improvements or team-oriented plays such as good passes and properly aligning. For example, during a practice session, the coach began yelling at the athletes due to not passing to teammates cutting towards the net. Several minutes later, an athlete attempted to pass to a cutting teammate and was intercepted. Instead of praising the athlete for trying to improve by listening to the coach’s advice, the athlete was yelled at and pulled out of the drill for an errant pass. This type of behavior may not only make athletes less likely to

engage in a behavior in the future (i.e., passing to cutting teammates), but it may also stunt their development due to a fear of being reprimanded.

Besides athletes and coaches emphasizing outcomes (i.e., goals scored or winning), parents also felt personally invested into the success of the team. While watching their son play, one parent stated, “We didn’t drive you here to lose.” Although the adults surrounding the team valued winning, the athletes themselves seemed to place more emphasis on fun and effort. An athlete stated, “We’re a super good team at working together... We don’t care really about the wins during this league. We just have fun.” This discrepancy between the athletes and adults was further enforced by some of the athletes’ motives for participation. Another athlete stated, “I like showing up and being with friends... I enjoy it, even if I didn’t have any friends on the team I would probably still play just for fun.” An outcome orientation seems to be reflected heavily in the adults while athletes intrinsically enjoy the sport and the camaraderie with their teammates.

**Communication differences due to skill level.** Coaches and athletes often communicated with less talented athletes differently than highly skilled individuals. During practice sessions, coaches would spend more individualized time with skilled athletes, while lesser skilled individuals were left unattended. Besides specialized attention from coaches for the skilled athletes, less-skilled athletes were often afforded fewer opportunities for growth via making mistakes than skilled athletes. For example, when less skilled athletes made a bad pass, they were either harshly reprimanded or taken out of play, whereas more skilled players were given a second chance with fewer consequences for a poor performance. More specifically, athletes were often divided at practice into offensive and defensive groups, with unskilled players being chosen to play defense while coaches would focus on the offensive player’s skill

development. This manifested into less skilled athletes coming together and acting out, whether that be toward a coach or fellow teammates.

As such, a parent noted, “In this age group, a year younger makes some boys seem way less skilled... The younger kids rarely get as much play time as the older ones... The seventh graders get frustrated [because of this differential in play time] and slam into teammates and say a lot of mean things.” Athletes also seemed to pick up on the way athletes were treated based on skill and would demean teammates or ostracize them from groups before or after practices. This was displayed as athletes would form cliques, often with the starters forming groups or picking each other exclusively as partners for drill-work. Athletes also noticed that the head coach structured their fall practices similarly to how their more competitive, spring league is formatted. Particularly, the present team participated in an optional fall league, but it should be noted that in spring, athletes are separated based on skill level. One athlete stated, “Yeah, usually in spring they split us into two teams, the more experienced players and the beginners so they don’t slow us down.” However, this divide based on skill level was implemented informally by the coach during this non-competitive league. This separation can limit the amount of resources that are allotted to the lesser skilled individuals, for whom this fall league can be a valuable opportunity for skill development.

### **Taking Risks and Playing Through Pain**

When overconforming to the sport ethic, successful athletes are told not to give in to pressure, pain or fear of injury (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). Those who adhere to the sport ethic expect athletes to overcome injury and challenge their bodies beyond normal standards (Coakley, 2015). In this context, participants stressed “toxic” masculinity, preached a “brush it off” attitude, and athletes emulated unsafe behaviors of professional athletes.

**Hegemonic masculinity.** Participants utilized phrases that emphasized the need to be masculine or tough to be successful in lacrosse. Coaches used phrases such as “be a man” or “don’t be a girl” when referring to gameplay or behaviors of athletes. Phrases used by the coaches typically compared an athlete’s behaviors (which were deemed not ‘masculine’ enough) to feminine characteristics. For example, the coach asked an athlete if he was doing “ballet” instead of playing lacrosse because he avoided contact going to the goal instead of utilizing his body and provoking contact. Athletes seemed to also view masculinity and toughness as an essential component to being successful or to fit in with sport norms. One athlete said, “Most teams play tough and hit hard... If we play like babies and don’t hit back, we wouldn’t be able to win.” Some athletes found that this masculine approach to sport created a more enjoyable environment, “I think that we should all get hit and hit because it makes it more intense and it’s really fun. It is going to toughen us up and stuff.” The goalie of the team explained that male lacrosse goalies don’t wear shin pads and that he stopped wearing them due to teasing from teammates. He stated, “I wore them the first couple days of practice, but my teammates kept calling me a girl... Getting hit is normal, the MLL players don’t wear them.” Parents also seemed to value lacrosse as a tool to make their children develop into tough, young men. One parent discussed using lacrosse this way, “... my son needs to be more of a man and playing lacrosse will hopefully do that for him.”

**“Brush it off.”** In line with the sport ethic component of playing through pain, participants described being injured as something that was expected to happen by playing sport, but not something that should prohibit one from being able to perform. Parents in the lacrosse environment understand that there is risk involved with participation and disregard pain as a legitimate excuse to complain or to not participate. Specifically, an athlete’s mother stated, “His



dad and I are just like ‘suck it up, you’re fine’... I’m like ‘if it’s not a bodily fluid that is leaking or if a bone is out we can actually talk about it.’” Similarly, one parent said that this mentality influences the way they treat their children. Specifically, they noted that they treat their son who plays lacrosse differently than their daughter who dances, “Yeah, it’s funny because I drop her off at ballet practice and all she needs is her shoes and I don’t worry. Every time I drop my son off, I worry about him getting hit in the head or breaking bones, but I just have accepted that we are going to deal with bumps and bruises.” Athletes also encouraged this ‘brush it off’ mentality during play. An athlete stated this regarding teammates dealing with injuries, “We have pads... I’ve twisted ankles, gotten bruised, but honestly, it’s just being tough... It only hurts for a couple seconds.” Coaches also encourage this attitude by continually suggesting that athletes “rub some dirt in it,” “it’s just a stinger, run it off,” or “shake it off” after large hits or painful plays. For example, the goalie on the lacrosse team was hit with a direct shot right on his kneecap and fell to the ground. The coach simply yelled at him to shake it off and to keep playing because they needed him to practice.

**Modeling professionals.** Professional athletes serve as role models for many youth athletes. Parents, coaches, and athletes in the present study seemed to copy equipment styles and behaviors from these professionals to increase the likelihood of the athlete becoming successful in sport. Athletes in the present study stated that they looked up to Major League Lacrosse (MLL) players and even tried to emulate them through the types of equipment they wear. For example, one athlete stated, “Yeah, I try to wear smaller chest pads... The MLL guys don’t even use them because they slow you down.” During the rapport building phase, the research team discussed the MLL with athletes and found that an admiration for the way they fight through pain was evident, which was representative of the “Brush it off” and Hegemonic Masculinity

themes. Parents even learn and provide information to their child based on what professionals are doing. One parent stated, “I learn a lot from watching MLL with him... I originally thought goalies should be wearing shin pads to protect from injury, but I realized that no one does it... It is silly, but that is just how lacrosse goalies dress.” The head coach was previously a Division I lacrosse player and has also coached at the collegiate level. The coach often drew comparisons based on his experiences as a player and often expected a certain ‘professionalism’ from the athletes, especially with the expectation that athletes would be tough and play through injury. This disconnect often resulted in overly high expectations as the coach didn’t seem to tailor his coaching to youth. Moreover, the participants in the present group based their equipment choices which may prevent injury and even their opinions of injury based on the practices of professional athletes.

### **Refusing to Accept Limits in the Pursuit of Possibilities**

As originally described, this component of the sport ethic involves an athlete who does not accept that situations are impossible and will do everything that it takes to overcome the odds (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). When one conforms to the sport ethic, they believe anything is possible in the sport context and that if one cannot accomplish a goal alone, they will employ the help of experts to aid them in their pursuit (Coakley, 2015). Relating to this component of the sport ethic, through the present study it was discovered multiple themes that may influence the development of this concept. The first is that participants sought advanced education and help when they couldn’t succeed on their own, the second is that participants conceptualized lacrosse as warfare, where they are only impeded by opponents, and lastly participants discussed how physical limits are simply just barriers to overcome.

**Seeking education and help.** Participants discussed that if the training in one league was inadequate, they would find other organizations or training facilities that would provide what was necessary to succeed. Parents, who often are a major source of information for their children, wrestle with their occasional inability to help; therefore, they place their trust in others. For example, a parent mentioned, “We were with another organization for two years, but the coach here has more experience and we can play year around.” In terms of education, one parent stated, “I usually watch YouTube videos for clarity on rules... I have very limited athletic ability, so I may not be able to go out and throw with him. So, I try to help him in other ways. I have a manual that we go through with rules and techniques.” Athletes also sought out the advice from external sources. One athlete stated, “I learn a lot from the coach, but I do watch a lot of videos online to understand what the older players are doing, then my dad and I practice it (e.g., footwork or stick-handling) afterwards.”

**Lacrosse as warfare.** Participants discussed that in order to be successful in lacrosse and to be able to achieve goals, lacrosse must be treated like a battle to be better than anyone else. Coaches often structured practice as scrimmages, pinning teammates against each other in hopes of improving performance. This frequently led to aggression and violence in forms of fighting or cheap hits. Coaches were recorded saying, “crush your opponent” or “destroy them,” suggesting that they actually cause physical harm to others. Athletes believed that this behavior would help them succeed and that treating your opponents like enemies would aide in this pursuit. Athletes in turn believed that opponents shouldn’t stand in their way and that serious actions (e.g., late or unnecessary hits) were acceptable to achieve goals. One athlete stated, “If someone is in my way, I’m going through them... We are taught to not let anyone get in the way of a good play.”

**Physical limits are barriers that are beatable.** Throughout data collection, it became apparent that athletes were expected not only by themselves, but also by parents and coaches, to not accept being tired or fatigued as an excuse to not achieve success. Coaches would tell athletes that due to their young age, being physically tired wasn't possible and that they should not allow those feelings to get in their way. One coach stated, "You guys are 11 and 12 years old, you aren't allowed to be tired." Athletes also viewed physical skills as those that could always improve, with no ceiling. Athletes rationalized working harder as developing the ability and making physical feats possible. One athlete stated, "No matter how tired I am, when I am done with my homework, I go into my backyard and practice footwork... I just need to learn the techniques to make it [at higher competitive levels]." In addition, parents didn't accept that athletes may have a physical skill limit. Specifically, parents believed that their sons could be elite in the sport, regardless of their current skill level and shared a similar belief that hard work would translate directly into success. One parent stated, "He's new to the game, but he puts so much work into this. I think the sky is the limit if he keeps putting the time in."

Besides the included themes that were identified in relation to the sport ethic conceptualization, it is important to note that these findings do not include interview data from the coaches in the present sample. The following section highlights the unique relationship dynamic that existed between the coaches in this context and the research team.

### **Researcher-Coach Relationship Dynamics**

It is important to note that observations were the only source of data collected for the coaches in the present study. The primary researcher had difficulties navigating interactions with the gatekeepers of the organization as well as the coach. For example, when introducing the study, the organization stated that the research was welcomed, although it was warned that

behaviors predisposing the development of the sport ethic were unlikely to be found. Similarly, when introducing the research to the coach, he was enthusiastic, stating that overdeviant behaviors in lacrosse are becoming more commonplace in the sport, but that he does not encourage nor let adults or athletes behave in this manner. For the sake of transparency and to get feedback on the preliminary findings, the coach was briefed on observations when he inquired. When explaining results to the coaching staff, they became stand-offish with the researchers.

This crumbling relationship began to interfere with other aspects of data collection. After about six weeks of observations and a week following the sharing of preliminary findings, practices would get rescheduled or cancelled without any notice to the researchers. When attempting to contact the coach, there was often not a response. Thus, an athlete's parent became the research team's unofficial liaison towards the end of the season for scheduling purposes. In terms of specific research issues, observations with coaches were not able to be checked for accuracy through member checking, or in an interview setting where any misrepresentations could have been addressed. In addition, end of season interviews that were supposed to be conducted with parents, coaches, and athletes were limited to two practice sessions, where the coach shortened the lengths of the interviews, often making athletes feel rushed or like they would receive punishment for missed practice time. The lack of time given decreased the depth of data that was able to be collected.

The dynamic shift in the researcher-coach relationship may be simply explained by an over-transparency from the researcher. At the onset of the season, as indicated, the coach was extremely excited to have the researchers involved with his team, yet, once unbiased findings that shed light on negative aspects of sport coaching were shared, communication ceased.

Possibly, the researchers, whom are outsiders to the sport of lacrosse, were not seen as experts in the sport, when the coach, a former athlete, saw himself as much more knowledgeable and was offended by findings.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of the present case study was to highlight the behaviors and localized social influences on the development of the sport ethic in a single youth lacrosse team. Despite the extensive body of literature discussing the potential detriments of overconforming to the sport ethic (Madrigal, Robbins, Gill, & Wurst, 2015; Weinberg, Vernau, & Horn, 2013), present day sport culture still glorifies athletes playing through injury or defying obstacles in the pursuit of success (Durkin, 2017; Zirm, 2016). Although the sport ethic is embedded into the culture of many contact sports (Singer, 2004), little is known about the formation of this belief in young athletes. As such, the present study gathered knowledge from parents, coaches, and athletes in a bounded group to better understand what types of behaviors may promote overconformity to one's sport culture as a key correlate to success. According to the sport ethic (Hughes & Coakley, 1991), and informed by the ecological systems perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1986), the development of the sport ethic can be informed by one's microsystem. It can be influenced by surrounding social and cultural spheres, with the present study exploring the most proximal of these levels.

The findings suggest that the component of sacrificing for one's sport is either encouraged by adults or believed by the athletes themselves. Specifically, a great deal of the athletes specialized in lacrosse, and often gave up other extra-curricular activities to participate in the sport year-round in order to enhance their chances of success. These findings are broadly consistent with previous literature that stated roughly 50% of parents of youth athletes

encouraged their child to specialize in one sport to increase the likelihood of collegiate or professional success (Padaki et al., 2017). Likewise, athletes may also feel like reducing the amount of non-sport related activities is necessary to become elite after witnessing teammates do so or by listening to coaches (Larson, McHugh, Young, & Rodgers, 2019; Watts, 1999). While it is already known that specialization is negatively associated with psychosocial and physical outcomes such as burnout or overuse injuries (Witt & Dangi, 2018), more concerning is that most collegiate athletes were multi-sport athletes growing up (Martin, Ewing, & Oregon, 2017). Yet, in addition to the extant literature on specialization, the present study illuminates how specialization may be enforced based on adult or peer influences, possibly serving as a signal for the development of later unsafe sport beliefs.

Participants also displayed behaviors that suggested an adherence to the idea that athletes should participate in sport solely to strive for distinction by creating a performance environment that valued skilled above novice individuals. Ames (1992) describes performance climates as one where success and achievement are based on outperforming or being superior compared to others. When adult leaders create a performance climate, athletes are more likely to find themselves participating in antisocial behaviors towards teammates to gain an edge as well as treating opponents inhumanely (Kavussanu & Spray, 2006; Stranger, Backhouse, Jennings, & McKenna, 2018). Although athletes did not explicitly describe sport as a “win at all cost” environment, and most indicated that they participated for a love of the game, the research team’s observations suggested that athletes displayed behaviors that would earn praise from parents who expected sport to be this way (e.g., being aggressive and tough). The performance climate as a normative sport environment, with adults and athletes alike praising goals scored over building social relationships, may cause negative sport experiences. This is problematic, as

athletes may not only be developing the belief that sport is to be performed in this type of climate, but perhaps are missing one of the most critical components of positive sport participation: building peer relationships (Smith, 2019). Parents often seemed to take more pride in their sons' performance than the youth themselves, who placed greater emphasis on the game (e.g., intrinsic desire to participate) or their teammates (e.g., building friendships).

Additionally, communication among the present group was differentiated based on an athlete's skill level. Commonly seen in sport and education settings, coaches build expectations the moment they meet an athlete, creating self-fulfilling behaviors among athletes. Consistent with the present findings, previous literature found that coaches directed less reinforcement and technical instruction to athletes whom they believed were less skilled (Rejeski, Darracott, & Hutslar, 1979). As such, these transactional behaviors from the coach can lead to decreased enjoyment and a higher chance of sport dropout for athletes who are less skilled (Evans, Vierimaa, Budziszewski, & Graupensperger, 2019). These feelings may also provoke athletes to believe that the only way to get adequate coaching is to outperform their peers, furthering the promotion of performance climates.

The present study also illuminated that athletes in this context were expected to adhere to the ideals of hegemonic masculinity and to conceptualize lacrosse as warfare, while not refusing to let injuries hinder their participation. In line with previous sport ethic research, our study further supports the notion that athletes who are exposed to an environment that enables the sport ethic are typically more likely to view sport as war and potentially engage in higher levels of unsportsmanlike play (e.g., purposely injuring another player, cheating; Shields, Funk, & Bredemeier, 2016). Also consistent with the present study, males often embrace this "warlike" attitude and are more likely to adopt this into their social identity if it is deemed acceptable in



their environment (Shields, Funk, & Bredemeier, 2015). Our study provides a novel view of the contesting orientation and its ties to the development of the sport ethic, shedding light on how euphemisms such as “kill him” or “beat him,” used by parents and coaches, can influence a young athlete’s sport beliefs. Additionally, parents were often supportive of athletes becoming “men” and learning how to cope with injuries. Kroshus and colleagues (2017) examined parents of athletes who were rehabilitating injuries and found that parents often encouraged their child to return to play early, often citing their own experiences in sport and how it serves as context to show your dedication to a group by sacrificing one’s comfort. This overemphasis of being tough and emulating professional athletes’ behaviors may open the door for a future overemphasis of the sport ethic belief.

A critical finding is the extraordinary lengths that parents and athletes will go to both financially and physically to overcome the barriers of sport. This theme aligns itself well to the idea that an athlete (or parent) refuses to let limits get in the way of success. This was seen as parents discussed the astronomical amounts of resources they invest into their child’s success as an athlete. Sport parenting literature has noted that parents often have the best intentions in mind, often investing a large amount of money into training, traveling organizations, and expensive equipment, which can lead to an overemphasis on winning as well as children feeling pressure to sacrifice for the game (Dunn, Dorsch, King & Rothlisberger, 2016). Moreover, parents are often willing to travel to get their child the best training available, even if it is physically draining for parents and their children alike (Baxter-Jones & Maffulli, 2003). It is imperative to note that youth athletes can often receive the benefits (i.e., physical and social development) of sport in a local setting without financially or emotionally draining one’s resources, especially in the present case.

Although the present case study was bounded and examined adolescent boys' lacrosse, there are a number of important messages for youth sport organizations who are attempting to provide positive experiences while shaping the development of healthy beliefs in their athletes. Although the present case may not be representative of all youth sport environments, the examples and experiences described herein aimed to shed light on possible behaviors that may manifest themselves into the unsafe sport beliefs. Specifically, with increasing reports of injuries and rapid growth in youth lacrosse (Logue, 2017), it is imperative that sport is introduced in a manner in which athletes can develop positive social relationships without the need to adhere to a possibly detrimental belief system. Moreover, adult leaders in sport settings should try to develop educational programming to better understand how to facilitate positive sport environments for their children (Dorsch, King, Tulane, Osai, Dunn, & Carlsen, 2018). Moreover, athletes should be steered away from following some of the on-field or off-field antics of professional athletes (e.g., encouraging playing through pain or describing sport as warfare), regardless of their parents' sport specific beliefs, to prevent them from adopting overdeviant behaviors. This responsibility may be dependent on organizational changes, to promote inclusion, regardless of skill level, while employing coaches who are trained in the sport (The Aspen Institute, 2019). In addition, coaches should attempt to foster a positive environment with athletes, regardless of talent level, to increase the quality and quantity of communication (Vierimaa, Bruner, & Côté, 2018).

As a stand-alone belief system, the sport ethic is not inherently problematic, unless one overconforms to these ideals, specifically in a younger population (Brewer & Tripp, 2005; Hughes & Coakley, 1991). In the present study, athletes were engaging in several behaviors (e.g., specialization, emphasizing outcome orientations, and pushing one's body to extreme

limits) that may not be developmentally appropriate, nor the best practice for youth sport. Sport at elite levels often requires specialization, but this should typically not be encouraged until the onset of adolescence. Previous literature has shown multi-sport athletes are more likely to reach elite-level competition than those who are specializing early (Côté, 1999; DiFiori et al., 2007).

It should be noted that elite level sport does often have a shift towards outcome-oriented goals (e.g., winning or being the best), as sport becomes an athlete's career (Elendu & Dennis, 2017); yet, youth sport should also be directed towards the development of important physical and social skills (Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2005). When considering the stated aims of the organization, the present study shed light on the disconnect between the microsystem and the organization within which the group existed. Although it is ideal to eliminate the overconformity of the sport ethic, especially in youth athletes, more education and framing of "positive" sport environments needs to be occurring so adults and athletes alike can cultivate a fruitful context for psychosocial and physical growth.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

Despite the strengths of the present study, it is not without limitations. Foremost, the all-male sample of the study does not necessarily reflect lacrosse as a sport, as women's lacrosse is often filled with similar displays of aggression (Miele, 2017), but also likely reflects several gender specific differences. Although the present sample aligned with the study's purpose, the development of the sport ethic should be explored from a variety of perspectives (e.g., age, gender, race, geographic location). For example, Shipherd (2010) explored a belief in the sport ethic as a predictor for playing through injury in high school athletics and reported higher probabilities for contact sports, though this could be explained by sport differences. Although lacrosse is not regarded as one of the more popular sports in the United States, it is important to

understand that recommendations were attempted to be made general enough to apply to other contexts, but should nevertheless be applied with caution. To that end, results were presented to help researchers and practitioners theorize findings based on their own experiences (Smith, 2018).

Additionally, although adequate rapport was built with the parents and athletes in the present study, the head coach appeared to be burned out by the presence of the research team by the conclusion of the season. This limited the amount of data that was able to be collected through interviews, as the coach restricted the interview sessions to 15 minutes prior to practice with athletes. The coach also rejected his opportunity to review the results of the study and have the primary researcher conduct a parent seminar at the conclusion of the season. Thus, besides the observations of the two coaches in the present case, an interview was not able to be conducted to gain insight into some of the observed behaviors.

In addition to the themes that were uncovered through the present study's focus on the microsystem, many other social and cultural factors may also influence the development of the sport ethic. Future research should attempt to gather data over a longer period, perhaps to understand how the sport ethic belief develops over multiple seasons (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). Moreover, based on the present findings, quantitative methodology could be employed to explore the relation of some of the indicated measures in a longitudinal or a repeated-measures design. Specifically, future research could measure factors that were discovered by using scales to understand how these feelings perhaps change over the course of a season. For example, researchers could utilize the sport specialization scale (Jayanthi et al., 2011), the moral disengagement in sport scale-short (Boardley & Kavussanu, 2008), or even contesting orientations (Shields, Funk, & Bredemeier, 2015), to examine how sport beliefs shift during the

season or across an athlete's development. Moreover, given the disconnect between the organizational beliefs and the actions that were exhibited by this team, further investigation on how to better disseminate information as well as to ensure that sport is being introduced safely is necessary.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, the present case study provided insight as to what localized behaviors from parents, coaches, or athletes may influence the development of the sport ethic belief system. The findings not only apply to youth lacrosse, but can be applied broadly to other contact sports in which similar experiences are found. The data provide evidence that although the sport ethic is not explicitly discussed in youth sport environments, many of the actions are proxy indicators and promote the ideals of this belief system. Quite often, athletes are thrust into a sport environment where specialization is expected, pressures to be superior to peers are amplified, large amount of investments are being made, and toughness is required to be successful. These environments not only oppose extant sport literature by negative impacting the athletes' sport experiences, but can also create a belief that sport needs to be a sacrificial and painful process. The findings provided several implications for sport parents, coaches, and athletes in recreational youth settings, indicating that more education into the *way* sport is designed and delivered is necessary. Moreover, it sheds light on the potential disconnect between what teams are promoting compared to what organizations expect. Understanding ways to restrict the development of the sport ethic may not only increase enjoyment in sport, but also athlete safety.

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