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Building Bonds on Teams: How Team Building Positively Impacts Young Athletes

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**BUILDING BONDS ON TEAMS:
HOW TEAM BUILDING POSITIVELY IMPACTS YOUNG ATHLETES**

**A THESIS
SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER'S
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE**

LEADERSHIP STUDIES

BY JENNIFER T. MULL-BROOKS

2019

ABSTRACT

Creating positive team culture in youth sports cultivates players who feel a part of a strong, close-knit organization which escalates their level of play and their desire to play. In addition to this, teams that have positive team culture develop on-field cohesion and trust that allows for sport strategy to be executed in a way that promotes success for the team as a whole. The methods used in coaching to promote this are focused on developing leadership, positive reinforcement, and other non-punitive measures. Scholarly research on this topic is sparse therefore this qualitative study attempts to add to the existing knowledge by analyzing information obtained during in-depth interviews with student-athlete.

Keywords: Team building, team bonding, youth sports, relationships, motivation, coaching, collegiate athlete

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction..... 1

Literature Review..... 3

 Building Positive Relationships on Teams..... 3

 Belief in Self and the Power of ‘We’..... 5

 Impact of Coaching Styles on Athletes..... 6

 Summary of Literature..... 7

Research Methods..... 7

 Sample..... 8

 Selection of Participants..... 8

 Definition of Terms..... 9

 Data Collection..... 10

 Data Analysis..... 10

 Ethical Considerations..... 10

Discussion..... 11

 Limitations..... 12

 Future Research..... 12

Conclusion..... 13

References..... 15

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Selection of Participants..... 8

Figure 2. Building Bonds Themes..... 11

APPENDICES

Appendix A. Final Approval..... 14

Appendix B. IRB Approval..... 17

Appendix C. Participant Recruitment Email..... 22

Appendix D. Interview Questions..... 23

INTRODUCTION

In the Spring of 2004, the Westbrook High School Blue Blazes baseball team in Westbrook, Maine was made up of twelve seniors and two sophomores. The players on the team came from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and very different upbringings. Some of the players lived in affluent, two parent homes, while others lived in single-parent, poverty-stricken homes. Some of the players were close friends, but many were loners, creating a dynamic that caused the players to get into fights regularly, including physical altercations over small issues. The team's coach, John Eisenhart, a second-year coach at the high school, was frustrated with the team, often yelling at his players for making mistakes on the field or fighting with each other off the field.

As the Spring season started, Coach Eisenhart talked to a teacher at the high school who recommended he stop yelling and talk to the players about them as people and get to know them. The teacher also recommended Coach Eisenhart share some things about himself in order for players to see him as a human being who cared about them. The teacher told him to tell the players about his kids and how much his five-year-old son looked up to the players on the team. Coach Eisenhart took the teachers advice and there began the first of many relationship and team building exercises with the team. Eisenhart hosted team dinners at his house, with his wife cooking pounds and pounds of pasta to feed the players, and showed movies based on true stories afterward about other teams, mostly famous ones, who came together and went on to win championships; teams like the T.C Williams Titans football as represented in Remember the Titans, and the 1980 U.S. Olympic Men's Hockey team as represented in the movie Miracle. Eisenhart also shared the story of his niece who had passed away and told the team they had an angel on their side. He told his team how much time he was spending away from his kids to coach and that he would love to have

his kids come see the team win. In turn, he also got to know the players' families, inviting them into conversations after games. Eisenhart also had a brother and a sister who taught at the high school, so he enlisted them to check grades and talk to players during school when he wasn't with them. As the season went on, and the team bonded at dinners and movies, and in the classrooms of Eisenhart's siblings, they began to win.

Teams that spend time on team building activities, alongside skills and strategy training, can be more successful than if they had not. Some of the greatest athletic success stories in United States history are born on this foundation. When the 1980 U.S. Olympic hockey team was created, it was comprised of standout college hockey players from all over the country who had competed with each other. Some of the players hated each other. Coach Herb Brooks made bringing the players together as one unified team a top priority. While he was not ever soft with his players, he made sure there was someone to play 'good cop' to support his players. He knew that to win the gold medal, he had to take the right players with the most heart and talent and bring them together as one. He said, "All-star teams fail because they rely solely on the individual's talent. The Soviets win because they take that talent and use it inside a system that's designed for the betterment of the team. My goal is to beat 'em at their own game." (O'Connor & Guggenheim, 2004)

Coach Herman Boone of the T.C. Williams Titans football team was faced with race relations on his team as the high school he coached at went through desegregation. He had to find a way to bring his players, who had never played together before, closer as a team in order to win. He started this bonding by taking them on a team retreat football camp to Gettysburg College. Here he said, "This is where they fought the battle of Gettysburg. Fifty thousand men died right here on this field, fighting the same fight that we are still fighting among ourselves today. This green field right here, painted red, bubblin' with the blood of young boys. Smoke and hot lead

pouring right through their bodies. Listen to their souls, men. I killed my brother with malice in my heart. Hatred destroyed my family. You listen, and you take a lesson from the dead. If we don't come together right now on this hallowed ground, we too will be destroyed, just like they were. I don't care if you like each other or not, but you will respect each other. And maybe... I don't know, maybe we'll learn to play this game like men.” (Yakin, 2000)

These examples of creating a team bond through team building activities show how players who feel a part of a strong, close knit team culture will escalate their level of play in order to win. In addition to this, teams who operate like this develop on-field cohesion and trust that allows for strategy to be executed in a way that promotes success for the team as a whole. Scholarly research on this topic is sparse with respect to the hypothesis here, however, qualitative research through interviews is proving to support the idea that this component of coaching strategy and team outcome is relevant. This qualitative study explores the process of Building Bonds on Teams, specifically How Team Building Positively Impacts Young Athletes. Interviews with collegiate athletes are conducted in order to collect information to support the research question.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Building Positive Relationships on Teams

The foundation for creating positive culture on a team in youth athletics is relationship building. Much like teachers need to know their students as individuals and how to motivate them and inspire them, so do coaches of sports. Hall et al, 2016, state, “Leaders, coaches, teammates, and teachers create a social psychological climate through their behaviors and interpersonal interactions with followers, players, fellow teammates, and students” (Hall et al, 2016). As in the classroom, there is a natural gap in the relationship between adult and young person based on power roles of coach and player. To tighten up this gap and make a coach more approachable by

a player, Van Mullem, Shimon, and Van Mullem (2017) state, “To develop interpersonal knowledge, the coach makes a deliberate attempt to get to know each student athlete. By taking initiative and making time to develop interpersonal knowledge, the coach weakens the power gap and provides an opportunity for student-athlete to feel more comfortable when communicating with the coach” (Van Mullem, Shimon, and Van Mullem, 2017). In addition to this, Van Mullem, Shimon, and Van Mullem also point to the importance of adapting to the players’ abilities and knowledge base, again, like a teacher must with students in a classroom. They state, “To be able to successfully adapt to the learner, the coach must develop the ability to understand emotions and how to communicate with others, also known as interpersonal knowledge. Interpersonal knowledge involves building relationships with student- athletes through social interaction to better meet their needs” (Van Mullem, Shimon, and Van Mullem, 2017). Coaches of youth athletic teams also bear the role of modeling positive behaviors and using the relationship they establish to then influence athletes. Lumpkin and Stokowski (2011) describe this role to model, teach, and exemplify, “fairness, teach athletes to place team ahead of the individual, instill self-discipline in all aspects of their lives, and help athletes face challenges on and off the playing field or court” (Lumpkin and Stokowski, 2011). This is a huge task for most coaches, especially youth coaches who often have little training and are merely coaching as volunteers because their children play, but it is key to building positive climate on the team and creating positive experiences for young athletes.

When a coach moves to a punitive model, it can be very harmful to a young athlete’s emotional state. Battaglia, Kerr, and Stirling, 2016, state, “The use of yelling and benching as punishment in sport share similarities with emotional abuse tactics reported within the coach-athlete relationship. For example, verbal behaviors such as shouting, humiliation, and belittling

comments have been identified as emotionally abusive when the coach is in a critical position of power over the athlete” (Battaglia, Kerr, and Stirling, 2016).

Belief in Self and the Power of ‘We’

Creating a positive team culture and cohesion depends heavily on team leadership building buy-in from players to be committed to team before self. It also is dependent upon a young athlete’s belief that he or she can improve their own abilities and contribute to the team’s overall success. Fransen et al, 2015, determined, “Leaders’ expressed team confidence may not only influence team members’ social identification with the team, but also strengthens team members’ confidence in their ability to successfully perform the team-oriented behaviors that are needed to achieve collective success” (Fransen et al, 2015). Creating common goals is one way to achieve the sense of we on a team and make every athlete feel like they are contributing to the success of the team. Without creating common goals, a coach risks dissention on the team based on competition between his or her own players. McLaren, Newland, Eys, and Newton, 2016, state, “If an athlete perceives that the coach or other group members promote competition among teammates over and above demonstrating maximal effort toward a goal, it is likely that athletes would not feel like they are ‘on the same page’ with others (McLaren, Newland, Eys, and Newton, 2016). Senécal, Loughead, and Bloom, 2008 examined common goals as well, finding in their study that, “The majority of players (68.4%) responded that the team-building intervention helped them play better as a team. When examining why, the players mentioned that it enabled them to be more focused on common goals (42.3%), allowed them to work together to reach their goals (26.9%), forced them to work harder (11.5%), and helped them set more realistic and manageable goals (7.7%)”. (Senécal, Loughead, and Bloom, 2008). This sense of ‘we’ is paramount in any organization in order to take the focus away from the individual to the collective goals of the group. Apfelstadt,

2015, states, “In a culture where winning is central, as it seems to be in athletics, everyone on a team must share the same goals” (Apfelstadt, 2015).

The combination of relationship building, staying away from punitive practices, and setting common goals for a team is the key to creating a positive culture that produces results for them team. In order for this to occur, coaches need to be thoughtful and strategic with respect to how they approach their players and team-building efforts. It is crucial that they know what they are doing so that they don't damage the team's culture by planning activities that allow for polarization of the team, or for cliques to form. Coaching is not just about knowledge of sports; it is a multifaceted role that includes reaching the 'whole athlete' as a player, person, and student of the game.

Impact of Coaching Styles on Athletes

The attitudes coaches express around their players has an impact on the team and the individual athletes on the team. Coaches who make their players believe they care about them and not just winning are more likely to give the players a positive experience in their sport. In an article by Nestor W. Sherman called *Why Female Athletes Quit: Implications for Coach Education*, it is stated that, “favorite coaches were described as: fun, nice, listening to and understanding players, encouraging to individuals, knowledgeable, and pushing the team to do its best” (Sherman & Hume, 2002). In contrast to this, the article also states that, “least favorite coaches were described as: mean, unfair, not encouraging, having yelled at players, having poor coaching skills, not nice, negative, and too strict” (Sherman & Hume, 2002). This is not to say that coaches can't yell at players, as many effective coaches do, but without the other elements that make players feel valued and important, this yelling comes across as very negative to athletes. In a study by Brian T. Gearity and Melissa Murray, 16 current or former athletes were found to reveal “the athletes' perception

that poor coaches failed to provide emotional or relational support; that the coach wasn't there for them and that they were on their own. Rather than caring about the athletes, poor coaches were described as concerned only with winning and making themselves look good" (Gearity & Murray, 2011).

Summary of Literature

The literature shows that there is a direct correlation between coaching methods, including team building activities, and a player's enjoyment of the sport and desire to continue to play. Punitive measures are harmful to the psyche of young athletes and leave them feeling unsupported and sad. Athletes who have a positive coach who encourages them and creates close bond between players impacts a young athlete's willingness and desire to continue to play. Those who choose to coach young people in sports, including volunteer parents, should be aware of the impact they have and the damage they can do to these impressionable young people who want to play.

RESEARCH METHODS

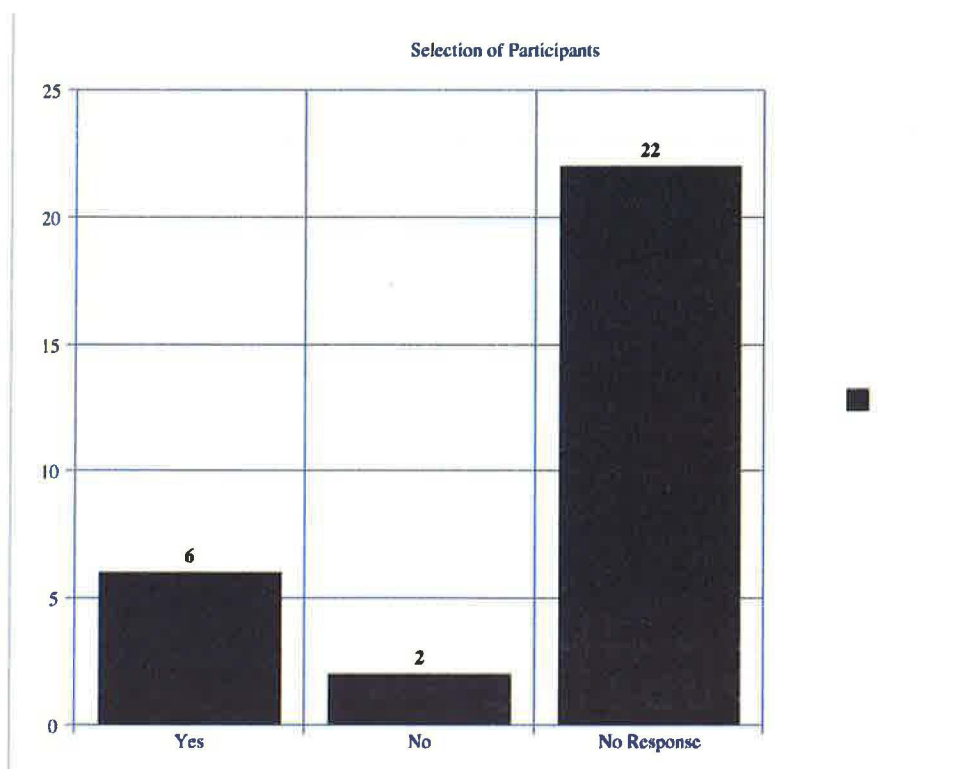
This qualitative research was performed using case study and in-depth interviews with collegiate athletes. Qualitative research is defined by John W. Creswell and J. David Creswell as, "a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The process of research involves emerging questions and procedures; collecting data in the participants' setting; analyzing the data inductively, building from particulars to general themes; and making interpretations of the meaning of the data" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The qualitative research method is best for this topic, as it allows for an up-close look at the perspectives of athletes and their response to different coaching styles and how these styles have impacted their love of athletics and their want to continue in athletics.

Sample

Collegiate athletes participating in this research are men’s and women’s soccer players. There are six participants, five female and one male. The ages range from 20 to 23.

Selection of Participants

Volunteer participants are recruited through researcher’s professional and social networks, via in-person, phone, email, and text conversations. Initial outreach to thirty potential participants was made by email and six of respondents agreed to be interviewed. Two declined to be interviewed and twenty-two did not respond. (Figure 1)



(Figure 1)

Definition of Terms

Athlete: a person who is trained or skilled in exercises, sports, or games requiring physical strength, agility, or stamina (Merriam-Webster)

Team: A number of persons associated together in work or activity: such as a group on one side (as in football or a debate) (Merriam-Webster)

Team building: The action or process of causing a group of people to work together effectively as a team, especially by means of activities and events designed to increase motivation and promote cooperation (Oxford)

Team bonding: The action or practice of seeking to improve the effectiveness, cohesiveness, and morale of a team of people (typically in sport or in the workplace), especially by means of activities or events intended to increase motivation and promote cooperation; the result of this, increased cohesion or morale in a team of people (Oxford)

Sport: An activity involving physical exertion and skill in which an individual or team competes against another or others for entertainment (Merriam-Webster)

Youth: The period between childhood and adult age (Merriam-Webster)

Relationships: the way in which two or more concepts, objects, or people are connected, or the state of being connected (Merriam-Webster)

Intrinsic motivation: An incentive to do something that arises from factors within the individual, such as a need to feel useful or to seek self-actualization (Oxford)

Coaching: One who instructs or trains; especially: one who instructs players in the fundamentals of a sport and directs team strategy (Merriam-Webster)

Collegiate: Characteristic of college student (Merriam-Webster)

Data Collection

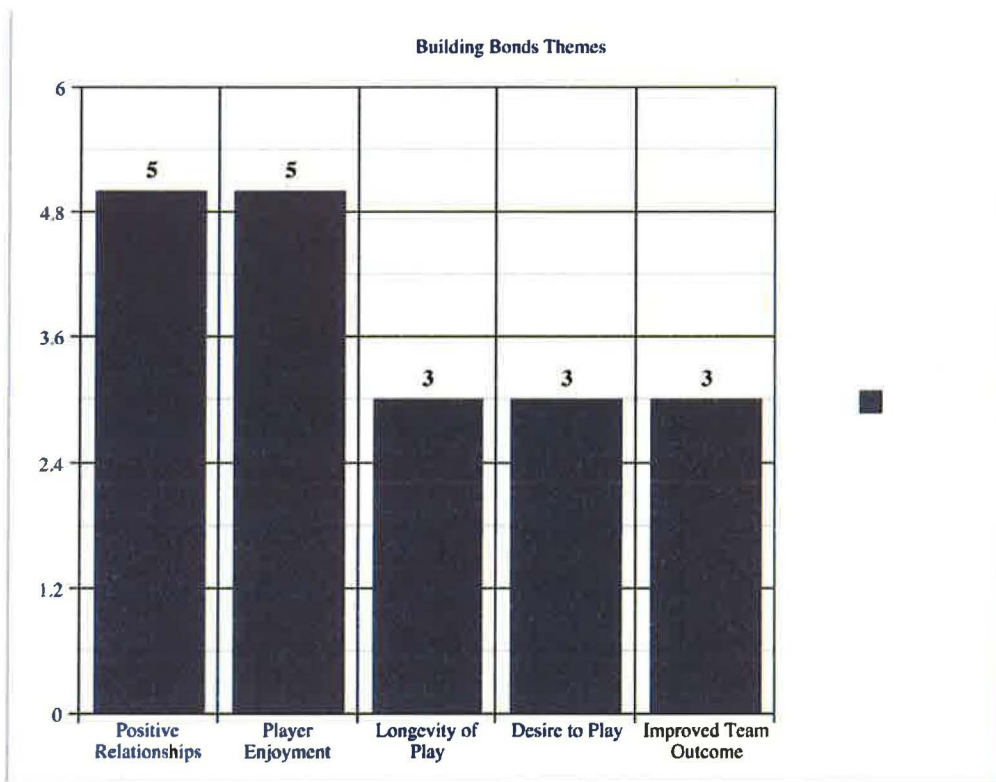
Participants were interviewed individually in-person and via video conferencing using Facetime. All participants were made aware they could withdraw from the interview at any time and that all materials, including recordings of the interviews and notes taken by the researcher, would be kept confidential and locked in the researcher's private office. Interviews varied in time, but none were longer than thirty minutes.

Data Analysis

Completed interviews were transcribed and analyzed. Themes that emerged were player enjoyment, positive relationships, longevity of play, desire to play, and improved team outcomes. (Figure 2) Out of the six participants interviewed, five reported enjoying being on a team more and had more positive relationships with their coaches and teammates when team building activities were used by coaches. Three out of the six reported that they continued to play their sport, soccer in this case, wanted to continue playing, and experienced more positive team outcomes when team building activities were a part of the team culture.

Ethical Considerations

Interviews were secured per the IRB. The CITI Social and Behavioral Research - Stage I Basic Course required to interview research subjects per the IRB was completed on July 22, 2018. The research questions were asked of participants once the IRB process was complete; this included in-person questioning and video conferencing via Facetime. In addition to this, data was collected from case studies related to the topic.



(Figure 2)

DISCUSSION

Themes that emerged showed that team building activities did promote team bonding and a more positive experience for young athletes. These activities made being a part of a team more fun and promoted cohesion on and off the field. Players reported having more fun on teams where coaches used team bonding techniques as part of the team strategy. Players did report that there was a balance to be found here; there could not be too much focus on team building and not enough focus on skill building and game strategies. Players reported the potential for this to work in a counterproductive way, as athletes want to win and having positive relationships was not all it took; players could become frustrated with one another during competition if they were losing all the time. Players stated the need for coaches to be mindful of this and use team building activities as a small part of team strategy.

The scholarly articles and in-depth interviews with collegiate athletes show that team building activities do positively impact young athletes. These team building activities help to build positive relationships between coaches and players, and between players themselves on teams. Athletes who were new to teams counted on team building activities to feel a part of their new team, creating a desire to continue to play. In addition to this, athletes involved in team bonding activities on teams felt a sense of commitment to not let their teammates down during competitions. This impacted the overall team performance and winning outcomes. Further research on the topic should include gender differences with respect to the impact of team building activities. This small study showed a possible difference between the impact on male and female players, with males possibly being less dependent upon this coaching strategy. The limitations of this study include the size of the study, as it is very small with only six participants, and time constraints due to the busyness of potential participants and then the participants' ability to make time to be interviewed by the researcher.

Limitations

The limitations of this study include the size of the study, as it is very small with only six participants, and time constraints due to the busy schedules of potential participants and then the participants' ability to make time to be interviewed by the researcher.

Future Research

This small study showed a possible difference between the impact of team building on male and female players, with males possibly being less dependent upon, or motivated by, this coaching strategy. Further research on the topic should include gender differences with respect to the impact of team building activities on young male and female athletes' motivation to continue playing sports.

CONCLUSION

The use of non-punitive motivation by coaches and the impact it has on athletes and team culture is related to the overall success of the team and individual players' desire to continue to play. This approach to coaching fosters team cohesion and unity on and off the field. It also makes competing in athletics more enjoyable for young athletes, which is in turn a positive experience and not damaging to their psyche. When coaches commit to leading teams, they must consider the power and influence they have over young athletes and should always be mindful of using positive and not punitive motivating strategies with these young people. The results for the individual players and for the team as a whole will prove to be more fruitful.

FINAL APPROVAL FORM

The University of Southern Maine

Leadership Studies

We hereby recommend that the thesis of Jennifer T. Mull Brooks, entitled Building Bonds on Teams: How Team Building Positively Impacts Young Athletes be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Leadership Studies Master's program.



Dr. Elizabeth Gorynova, Thesis Advisor



Blair Marelli, Second Reader

Accepted



Dr. Daniel Jenkins, Leadership Studies Department Chair

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APPENDIX B**IRB Approval****University of Southern Maine****CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH**

Project Title: Building Bonds on Teams: How Team Building Positively Impacts Young

Athletes **Principal Investigator(s):** Jennifer Mull-Brooks, University of Southern Maine, Dr.

Elizabeth Goryunova, Professor /Faculty Advisor, University of Southern Maine

Introduction:

Please read this form, you may also request that the form is read to you. The purpose of this form is to provide you with information about this research study, and if you choose to participate, document your decision. You are encouraged to ask any questions that you may have about this study, now, during or after the project is complete. You can take as much time as you need to decide whether or not you want to participate. Your participation is voluntary.

Why is this study being done?

The purpose of this study is to determine if a coaches effort to create a strong team bond in youth athletics impacts the athletes involved in a positive way. This study involves research in order to better understand the outcomes of coaching attitudes with players and teams.

Who will be in this study?

You have been chosen for this study because you are known to be a person who has competed in youth athletics, high school athletics, and/or collegiate soccer.

You must be at least 18 years of age to participate.

What will I be asked to do?

You will be asked to participate in an interview with me that will be recorded and transcribed at a later date. This is a small study of athletes who attend the University of Southern Maine who have experienced many types of coaches and team dynamics. The interview will last about an hour. This will be the only thing you will be asked to do for this research. I will be the only person involved in the research and will be the only person you will give information to. This research will be submitted for review to Dr. Elizabeth Goryunova, my faculty advisor for the duration of this research. There is no compensation for participating in this research.

What are the possible risks of taking part in this study?

There are no foreseeable risks associated with participation in this study.

What are the possible benefits of taking part in this study?

There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this study.

What will it cost me?

No costs are expected to be incurred by you. I am able to meet you in person at a location convenient to you so that you may avoid any travel expenses.

How will my privacy be protected?

This research project will be viewed as part of my Master's Capstone in Leadership Studies. I will be submitting this research to Dr. Elizabeth Goryunova for grading purposes and feedback on the research presentation. Interviews will be digitally recorded and transcribed by me (researcher). All recordings and transcripts will be securely stored in my private office. All digital recordings will be stored on my private computer and will be password protected. The results will be integrated into the research in aggregate form. No personal information will be shared and all quotes, if used for analysis, will be written using aliases instead of individuals' names.

How will my data be kept confidential?

You will be digitally recorded when interviewed for transcription purposes only. These recordings will be deleted once the transcriptions are completed by me. The results will be integrated into the research in aggregate form. No personal information will be shared and all quotes, if used for analysis, will be written using aliases. All data will be kept on my laptop that only I have access to via password protection. All data will be locked in my private office. Recordings will be held for three years and then deleted.

What are my rights as a research participant?

Your participation is voluntary. Your decision to participate will have no impact on your current or future relations with the University of Southern Maine. You may skip or refuse to answer any question for any reason. If you choose not to participate, there is no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits that you are otherwise entitled to receive. You are free to withdraw from this research study at any time, for any reason. If you choose to withdraw from the research there will be no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits that you are otherwise entitled to receive. You will be given the opportunity to listen to your recordings once completed if you wish.

What other options do I have?

You may choose not to participate.

Whom may I contact with questions?

The researcher conducting this study is Jennifer Mull-Brooks . For questions or more information concerning this research you may contact me at 207-899-9804 or by email at jennifer.mull@maine.edu , or faculty advisor Elizabeth Goryunova at 207-999-6015 or by email at elizabeth.goryunova@maine.edu.

Researcher's Statement

The participant named above had sufficient time to consider the information, had an opportunity to ask questions, and voluntarily agreed to be in this study.

Jennifer T. Mull -Brooks (JTMB electronic signature) Researcher's signature

Jennifer Mull-Brooks

December 17, 2018

Printed name

Date

IRB 18-10-1161
Approved by USM IRB
December 18, 2018 - December 17, 2019

APPENDIX C**Participant recruitment email**

I am Jennifer Mull-Brooks and I am a graduate student at the University of Southern Maine in the Leadership Studies Master's program. I am conducting a research project called Building Bonds on Teams: How Team Building Positively Impacts Young Athletes. I am emailing you to ask if you would be willing to be interviewed by me for about 30 minutes about your experience as a young athlete with respect to this topic. Participation in this research is completely voluntary and you may end your participation at any time. You will be asked to sign a consent form explaining this and other pertinent information, including how your privacy will be protected. If you are interested, or have any clarifying questions, please respond to this email. Thank you for your consideration.

Gratefully,

Jennifer Mull-Brooks M.S. Ed., CAGS

APPENDIX D**Interview Questions for Qualitative Study**

- 1.) Describe a time when you played on any athletic team where team building was a part of a strategy used by a coach to create team unity.
- 2.) Describe how team building activities on organized athletic teams have impacted your desire to continue to play sports and your want to continue playing all the way up through college.

Probing questions to follow as respondents answer. Elaboration and clarification questions will be used to encourage respondents to share more information as they are interviewed. These will include questions beginning with phrases similar to:

“Can you explain further about.....?”

“When you said you enjoyed playing for that coach, could you be more specific about.....?”

“Why did you enjoy.....?”

“How did that impact.....?”