'Here, you're all good enough to play': lessons learned from the GAA Super Games Centre

Daragh Sheridan
Pete Coffee
Pat Daly
David Lavallee

1   Running Head: LESSONS LEARNED

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4   "*Here, you're all good enough to play*": Lessons Learned from the GAA Super Games

5   Centre

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8   Daragh Sheridan

9   High Performance Sport New Zealand

10   Pete Coffee

11   University of Stirling

12   Pat Daly

13   Gaelic Athletic Association

14   David Lavallee

15   Abertay University

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1 **Abstract**

2 Drop out from youth sport participation is a significant issue that has emerged to become a

3 major health concern around the world. In order to counteract drop out trends in sport,

4 organizations responsible for promoting and sustaining participation have begun to redesign

5 sport participation experiences in-line with the needs of young participants. The Gaelic

6 Athletic Association (GAA) reversed a significant drop-out rate among participants between

7 the ages of 12-16 years within six years through an initiative called the Super Games Centre.

8 The aim of this paper is to identify key factors associated with the implementation success of

9 the GAA Super Games Centre other sport organizations could consider. Focus groups with

10 participants, parents, and coaches identified several critical success factors that, when

11 implemented, can help reverse drop out from sport. Recommendations are provided for

12 organizations responsible for promoting and sustaining participation in sport.

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15 *Keywords:* participation; peers; support; sport; youth

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1   *"Here, you're all good enough to play"*: Lessons Learned from the GAA Super Games

2   Centre

3   Dropout from youth sport participation is a significant issue that has emerged to

4   become a major health concern around the world, with research identifying dropout rates

5   exceeding 30% in some countries (Crane & Temple, 2015; Lee, Pope & Gao, 2018). A

6   portion of this dropout may reflect sampling of sports, where children are trying out or

7   transferring between different sports. However, many youth dropout from sport as a result of

8   dissatisfaction or negative experiences (Sheridan, Coffee, & Lavallee, 2014).

9   In order to counteract drop out trends in sport, organizations responsible for

10   promoting and sustaining participation have begun to redesign sport participation experiences

11   in-line with the needs of young participants (Balish, McLaren, Rainham, & Blanchard, 2014).

12   This redesign involves a process of modifying traditional games environments to make the

13   participant the highest priority. Examples of such changes include reducing a pitch size

14   (facility), modifying ball size and/or shape (equipment), and rule changes that everybody

15   must play (regulation). In addition to these games-specific changes, researchers have also

16   broadened the approach to consider social factors. Established correlates of youth sport drop

17   out are largely social in nature and highlight the crucial role that coaches, parents, and

18   teammates play in creating the conditions for continued participation in sport (Sheridan et al.,

19   2014).

20   The Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) is the largest sporting organization in Ireland

21   (see Lavallee, Sheridan, Coffee, & Daly, 2019). In 2012, they identified a 19.38% drop-out

22   rate involving 3,491 participants between the ages of 12-16 years. The two key contributory

23   factors that created the conditions for drop out in the GAA were: a culture of valuing the

24   outcome (i.e., winning) over the developmental process (i.e., achieving one's full potential);

1   and, inadequate competition frameworks (i.e., the absence of a meaningful program of

2   regular and scheduled games). The GAA subsequently developed and tested a unique

3   program called the Super Games Centre as a potential solution to drop out: Coaches deliver a

4   set of planned modifications to the standard rules at flexible times each week and at locations

5   within a 20 minute drive-time radius for participants at Super Games Centres. The games

6   modifications are informed from six values (i.e., positive feedback, empowerment,

7   belonging, effort, respect, and enjoyment) that have been shown to positively impact youth

8   engagement in sport (Sheridan et al., 2014). The values act as a guide to applying the

9   modifications to games (e.g., teams earn additional points for providing positive feedback to

10   teammates and opponents; see Table 1). A study of the Super Games Centre in 2018 found

11   that the drop-out trend in the GAA had been reversed, with an increase in 7,012 new 12-16

12   year old participants identified (Lavallee et al., 2019).

13   A proliferation of research over the past decade has led to a greater understanding of

14   the role of social support in a youth sport context. Although studies have highlighted the

15   importance of social support as a determinant of physical activity in adolescents (Balish et.

16   al., 2014), few research studies have examined the effect of perceived social support relative

17   to youth sport drop out. In explaining the effect of perceived support upon intentions to drop

18   out, it is also important to consider the role of social identity. Previous research highlighted

19   that changing the structure of sport (e.g., rules, procedures and competition structures) may

20   lead to more meaningful decreases in sport attrition (Balish et al., 2014). The findings from

21   the Lavallee et al. (2019) study demonstrated that an increase in perceived support was

22   associated with an increase in social identity, which in turn predicted intentions to drop out.

1   The aim of this paper is to identify key factors associated with the implementation

2   success GAA Super Games Centre model that other sport organizations aiming to reverse

3   drop out could consider.

4   **GAA Super Games Centre**

5   The following three groups were recruited to help identify lessons learned: (1)

6   participants who attended a Super Game Centre; (2) parents with a child who attended a

7   Super Game Centre; and, (3) individuals who provided coaching support in a Super Game

8   Centre. A university ethics committee granted approval of the research, and prospective

9   participants were provided with an information letter and consent form (Sheridan, 2017). A

10   total of 15 focus groups were conducted, involving 29 players, 22 parents, and 14 coaches

11   across Super Games Centres in five Ireland counties (i.e., Dublin, Kildare, Laois, Limerick,

12   and Waterford). Questions were tailored to the specific focus group, and related to:

13   experience of the Super Games Centre; factors influencing dropout; and future participation

14   intention (Krueger & Casey, 2018). All focus groups were digitally-recorded and transcribed

15   (duration range: 35-90 minutes). A thematic analysis approach was employed and identified

16   the following six themes as central to the success of the GAA Super Games Centre model:

17   peer-led promotion; fitness and skill development; friendship development in a non-

18   competitive setting; ease of access; support-enducing environment; and inclusive games

19   format (Krueger, 2017).

20   **Peer-led promotion**

21   Promotion of the Super Games Centre was found to be a key factor towards reversing

22   sport drop-out. The focus group data highlighted the importance of assisting players to

23   successfully appraise the available support that is contained with the games experience.

24   Promoting the Super Games Centre via a range of youth-centered media outlets is key in

ensuring that players perceive it as a positive growth promoting initiative. Peer-to-peer

"selling" of the Super Games Centre is an important form of promotion that was highlighted

as a significant growth driver. As a result, peer-led promotion forms a central part of the

effectively communicating games opportunities to youth participation audiences. Evidence

from coach focus groups highlighted the role of peer-to-peer promotion in generating

participation uptake within a local community context, for example:

> *And it did because they were talking to their friends about it and you could see every*
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> *week there was one or two more starting to come in from the local school area.*

Evidence from the following participant focus group also highlights the significance of peer

support in influencing a decision to continue participation:

> *Even when it started hailstones there, one of us said 'how about we go in the hall and*
>
> *play, just spend time passing. Rather than just saying 'oh we'll just leave' we stayed.*

Fitness and skill development

The Super Games Centre enables the development of greater fitness levels among

participants as a result of getting more game time, which in turn reduces intentions to drop

out:

> *In the club setting it's more, if you play; you have to be the best. And you have to be*
>
> *the fittest. And you have to have all this. In club it's all about whoever's best and*
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> *here fitness isn't an issue cause you play a lot a' football. And eventually you will get*
>
> *fit. So last year I was very unfit and I didn't play a match at all I don't think now for*
>
> *sure. So I finally got sick of it anyway. I was going to leave. But I came to here now*
>
> *anyway. I got a bit more fitness and a bit more football and eventually now I got to*
>
> *play.*

The relationship between getting fit as a result of a getting game time and not dropping out is also reflected in the following participant response:

> *So last year I was very unfit and I didn't play a match at all. I don't think now for sure. I was going to leave.*

The role of increased skill development is also influential, as highlighted by the following participant:

> *So just the more matches you're playing, I think, the better you can get. If you're like, like stopping and doing training and your coach is like explaining everything and you're not really getting enough time. But in here you get to just keep playing and playing and playing and get more touches and hitting the ball further. Like you come here once. You might hit it thirty yards. And then you come here the next day and you might get thirty-five. And you can keep improving all the time.*

Friendship development in a non-competitive setting

Players, parents, and coaches all highlighted the significance of friendship development during the Super Games Centre model as a reason for continued participation. Evidence from a player perspective highlighted the importance of getting to know their peer's names in order to play the game effectively:

> *Making friends, yeah, because like there's no point playing the sport if you don't know anyone. Like your team is like, you have to make friends with them before like you can really get to know them. Cause like there's no point calling for a ball if it's somebody you don't know, like.*

Evidence from a parent focus group provided a key insight into the significance of a non-competitive social setting whereby participants can form friendships in absence of seeing their peers as competitors:

My lads like to play each other in clubs. And they won't talk to each other. But now if they went to play a club match then, 'oh there's Jamie or there's John or whatever'. They, they know each other now by names and they're friends.

Another parent noted:

The big thing for me was the friendship. It made him more aware of the other clubs that are out there as well. He seems to know a lot more like young lads around now. And they know each other by first name.

Evidence from a coach perspective highlighted how relationships between participants had become closer and led to participants arriving in groups to the Super Game Centre:

They're so close out there, you know, compared to what they were the first week, like, they just, even they'd come down together instead of arriving on their own.

Ease of access

The focus groups highlighted the importance of location and timing concerning the operation of Super Games Centres as enabling them to respond the key local forces shaping a player's decision to participate in sport. A steering group, consisting of representatives from the GAA Executive, academia, and coaches advised and guided the delivery of Super Game Centres, including the content, locations, and timing. As a result, Super Games Centres regularly changed their session times and locations in order to meet the needs of players and reported a positive participation uptake in response. Several participants and parents highlighted the importance of fitting sports into other commitments, for example:

You are training with the club maybe two nights a week. And then we have music on Wednesdays. So it kind of fits in then on a Friday cause there's never anything on.

The respondents across the focus groups also reported how the ease of access to games played a key role in reducing intentions to drop out. This finding was supported from both

1   player and coach perspectives. Evidence from a player perspective highlighted the

2   importance of getting games time as opposed to normal skill development experiences in

3   their club setting:

4   *I was excited to come here because, well in a way I thought we were gonna be doing*

5   *like skills and all the usual at the club. But when I came down here the first week it*

6   *was just games, games, games.*

7   Evidence from a coach perspective highlighted the importance of players knowing that they

8   are guaranteed a game in order to positively impact their desire to continue participation:

9   *Knowing like everyone's going to get a game or be in a team because you know it*

10   *encourages people to turn up because they know they're going to play football and*

11   *they know they're going to get a game. And when you see the enjoyment of the people*

12   *when they are playing like instead of standing on the line looking at it, you know like*

13   *everyone wants to get a game, and everyone turns up to get a game.*

14   **Support-enducing environment**

15   Evidence from a coach perspective relating to parent feedback highlighted the impact

16   of the Super Games Centre in reversing a previous decision to drop out:

17   *I was speaking to another parent after, and he came over to me and he said your*

18   *centre is working. And I said what do you mean? He said them two lads have come*

19   *back to training for the last two weeks, with the club they'd gone away from last year.*

20   *So I says oh, right, so it obviously had the effect of confidence on the players as well,*

21   *they'd got an enjoyment factor back for football and they'd gone back playing.*

22   Evidence from coach focus groups also highlighted the significance of positive feedback:

23   *It's, I'm trying to think, it's just the environment that's there that they know that*

24   *they're not gonna be given out if this happens. They're coming in relaxed. They're*

1   *coming in knowing what, what's gonna happen. It's not, they're not, they're coming*

2   *in without fear basically.*

3 This response if further supported by evidence from a parent perspective which highlighted

4 the impact of a non-pressurized Super Games Centre experience:

5   *Well I, again it comes down to pressure I think. And he knows that no-one's gonna*

6   *shout at him. Nothing's gonna happen to him. You make a mistake, no-one's gonna*

7   *shout at you. No pressure. He knows he's not gonna get took off. He knows he's*

8   *gonna start, play a game.*

9 **Inclusive games format**

10   The inclusive games format was cited as a significant part of the Super Games Centre

11 model from participant, coach, and parent perspectives as exemplified in the following quote

12 from one participant: *Here, you're all good enough to play.* An example of evidence from a

13 parent perspective also highlighted a non-focus on winning as critical in enabling players to

14 enjoy the games experience and promote the Super Games Centre to their peers:

15   *They've dragged in a few more lads it's clearly the enjoyment thing, they've really got*

16   *it back again and they love coming down because there's literally no, you know it's*

17   *not winning or losing it's just having a bit of fun with the lads, really enjoying it.* This

18   evidence is further supported from a player perspective: *when you come to the Super*

19   *Game Centre like it's not as serious as a proper football match or anything like that*

20   *for your club. It's just there for the craic to have with the lads like.*

21 Evidence from a coach perspective highlighted the importance of enabling participants to

22 become autonomous during their games experience:

It opened my eyes big time how to coach kids properly so that you're not enforcing them to do stuff…. see what they develop and see these things themselves without enforcing them.

An example of this approach is further support by evidence from a player perspective which highlighted the significance of positional freedom in impacting his intention to continue participation:

So I can go play maybe midfield and you get a lot of touches. And then you feel like you just wanna stay here for the rest a' the day and just keep playing hurling but you're only here for an hour.

This autonomy promoting approach was further supported in this player's response:

Players out there are out there because they want to be out there. They're not out there, they're not made to be there, say some people who are like made to do sports. It's all their own choice.

Conclusions

The insights from the GAA Super Games Centre highlight a number of key considerations other sports organizations aiming to reverse drop out from their sport could consider. One of the most significant features identified across the focus groups with participants, parents, and coaches relates to how the six evidence-based values of continued participation in sport (Sheridan et al., 2014) were translated into a series of rules, which enable the provision of a standardized games experience for each participant. The focus groups highlighted the significance of an inclusive games format (e.g., enjoyment, autonomy) in influencing intergroup relationships (e.g., friendship development, peer to peer promotion) between players, teammates, and their coach in reversing the documented drop out trend.

1   The manipulation of the games environment also enables a greater shared support

2   responsibility to form between the coaches, players, and parents. The consequence of this

3   shared supportive environment leads to a range of key supports being exchanged between

4   coaches, participants, and parents. In particular, coaches are armed with a set of values which

5   inform a set of innovative games modifications that have a significant effect on the

6   experience of the participants. The presence of a coaching process backed by a set of

7   evidence-based values enables coaches to facilitate a games environment which leads to the

8   creation of other subsequent peer-related supports between the participants. This highlights

9   the role of the coach and the implications of having a clear coaching process in shaping and

10   creating a support-inducing environment (Gilbert, 2016). These insights can be used to

11   educate and inform coaches of their role as support providers in a games context. In addition,

12   the values can be used by parents and players to outline what is to be expected from a coach

13   in order to create and manage a games environment that is positive and growth promoting.

14   In addition to an inclusive games format, this paper also highlighted the importance of

15   the location and timing in reducing drop-out. The time required to reach a location is a key

16   factor in increasing youth sport participation (O'Reilly, Parent, Berger, Hernandez, & Seguin,

17   2015), and Super Games Centres aimed for the the proximity of locations to be within a 20-

18   minute drive time radius by car for all participants. The flexibility of session times to

19   accommodate competing interests of participants also allows Super Games Centres to

20   respond to the local contexts impacting a player's decision to participate in sport or drop-out.

21   Social support theory provided the theoretical perspective for this study, which

22   provides an insight into some of the key factors relating to the effect of perceived support

23   upon intentions to drop out. The factors include a perception that players have access to

24   games on a regular basis and the perception that the games format engenders enjoyment,

respect, autonomy, competence, belonging and friendship. Sheridan et al. (2014) previously

highlighted the significance of these factors in positively impacting the climate and

experience of youth sport participation.

In terms of the role of social identity in the context of this study, the findings suggest

that the modified games experience increased a sense of belonging within the social setting

connected to the GAA Super Games Centre. The study findings also provide insight into a

range of key factors, which helped to explain the effect that the intervention had upon

coaches, parents, and players, although a limitation is that the intervention focused on male

adolescents (Lavallee et al., 2019). Each of the factors (i.e., team selection ethos, friendship

development, enjoyment emphasis, respect and team development) reflected the operating

expectations as set down in accordance with the six Super Games Centre values. This

evidence highlighted the role that an increase in social identity can play in enhancing the

perception of available support within a social setting. This finding is in-line with

contemporary research in a youth sport setting which has found that a common social identity

is significantly associated with perceived support.

In conclusion, this paper of the GAA Super Games Centre highights considerations

other sport organizations aiming to reverse drop out from their sport could consider. Focus

groups with participants, parents, and coaches identified several critical success factors that,

when delivered successfully, can help reverse drop out from sport.

1   **The Authors**

2

3   Daragh Sheridan

4   High Performance Sport New Zealand

5   Email: daragh.sheridan@hpsnz.org.nz

6

7   Pete Coffee

8   Stirling University

9   Email: peter.coffee@stir.ac.uk

10

11   Pat Daly

12   Gaelic Athletic Association

13   Email: pat.daly@gaa.ie

14

15   David Lavallee

16   Abertay University

17   Email: d.lavallee@abertay.ac.uk

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1   Table 1: *Super Games Centre Values and Games Modifications*
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Super Games Centre Values	Games Modifications
Positive Feedback *'All communication is positive and promotes growth'*	-Teams are given an extra point when players give positive feedback ("unlucky – head up"; "better luck next time"; "great effort") during a mistake situation or a breakdown in possession involving two or more players; -At the end of the session each team is to identify the player from the opposite team who provided the most encouragement/support during the session.
Empowerment *'Players shape and own the games experience'*	-The coach randomly nominates the team captain who then pick their team and set out their team formation before the commencement of the game. This leadership role is alternated at the start of each subsequent game with a new leader who gets to reset a formation and give instructions to teammates; -The coach removes the referee from the games and asks players to referee their game amongst themselves by asking players to declare a foul if they have fouled an opponent.
Belonging *'Every player feels connected'*	-Players are tasked with getting to know their team mate's names and are awarded points for when players pass ball to a team mate and state the name of the ball receiver before the pass is completed. Three successful naming completions leads to one point; -At the start of the session each player to identify how they propose to contribute to the team.
Effort *'Greater effort and physical fitness is promoted'*	-Teams are awarded double points for when a team scores and the outfield team (not including the goal keeper) crosses the half way line upon the score being completed. Thus greater effort gets rewarded; -An extra point is offered for a hook, block down, or forcing an error.
Respect *'Everyone has due regard for each other's feelings and rights'*	-If a player is fouled the offending player offers to help the other up and check if they are all right. The situation ends with a handshake; -Only team captain/leader - wearing a designated arm band – is allowed to communicate with the match referee.
Enjoyment *'Players have fun'*	-Each game starts with the most scores in a minute, most scores out of 10 kicks/shots from 20/45m line. -Each game to conclude with the most scores in a minute, most scores out of 10 kicks/shots from 20/45m line;

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