

SOCIAL ASPECTS OF ADOLESCENT ATHLETES' DEVELOPMENT

Introduction

According to the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services website, while young children spend most of their time with their family and their social circle grows when they go to school, adolescence is a more significant stage of social development. The social circles of adolescents grow much more as they take part in team sports, student organisations, part-time jobs, etc. This causes them to spend less time with their families and focus more time and attention on their peers. They also develop their own identities and create relationships with adults outside the family who can become mentors. Adolescents also develop the cognitive abilities to have deeper conversations and express their emotions better. They have greater responsibilities and adopt new roles, such as leadership in school, clubs, or sports organisations. Nevertheless, we need to remember that adolescents are still young and need support as they experience these new roles. Role-playing and strategies modelled by peers and adult mentors can help adolescents to practise problem-solving, decision-making skills, communication, and cooperation (Spence, 2003).

England invests around £40 million per year in English youth football academies and there is great pressure on football academy managers and coaches to facilitate the development of more successful English players (Sagar et al., 2010). At the same time, those involved in the management of youth football academies and researchers in the

field need take into consideration the fact that this industry deals with the lives of children and adolescents.

Like all youth, young athletes experience dynamic physical changes, as well as psychological and social difficulties. Athletes that involved in high-performance sports shown to have extra risks to their psychosocial well-being. Alongside the same risks as all adolescents, such as stressful life events, difficulties at school and relationship problems inside and outside the home, athletes also experience sport-specific concerns like risks of physical injury (Purcell et al., 2019), performance pressures and fear of failure (Sagar et al., 2010). This paper discusses these psychosocial aspects of the development of the young professional football player.

Psycho-Social Issues

During adolescence, the rate of physical development varies significantly between individuals, and some athletes of the same chronological age grow in height and muscle mass much earlier than others. It has been shown that these differences in growth and maturation between players in the same year group, affect player performance, development, and chances of selection in youth soccer. The players who mature earlier have stronger physical capabilities such as body height and running speed than the late-matured players who may have better technical abilities. The early matured players tend to dominate the game or performance and are more likely to be selected for promotion (Cumming et al., 2017). This may have positive or negative social and psychological effects on both the late and early matured players.

According to Cumming et al. (2017) athletes that are physically small or delayed in maturation may be at higher risk of injury. “Bio-banding” is a strategy which groups athletes based on their physical characteristics rather than chronological age. However, this strategy does not take into consideration the psychological and social developmental stage and technical capability of the early-matured players, which may not be aligned with their physical characteristics. It may not be a positive psychosocial experience for an early physically matured player to compete against or train with older players, if he does not have the technical abilities or psychological maturity. Also, a late-maturing player who had good technical skills may not benefit from competing against teammates who are younger than him but at a similar physical maturity stage. However, Cumming et al. (2017) showed that in most cases there were positive effects of the “Bio-banding” strategy. The players benefited from the new challenges they faced, from playing with and against players of mixed experience and age, or from opportunities to show their technical abilities. Late maturing players considered the game less physically challenging but valued the chance to use, develop and show their technical and physical abilities. Regarding the psychological aspects of the learning experience, the players described the chance to develop positive psychological and behavioural skills (Cumming et al., 2017).

According to Kelly et al. (2021) when sports programmes group athletes according to their DOB in the calendar year, the older athletes born right after the cut-off date are frequently bigger and stronger than those born later in the year. This may be misunderstood to be a technical playing advantage, leading to the over-selection of bigger-older players, who may have access to higher quality coaching, competition, and facilities, that can allow

them to become better players (Furley & Memmert., 2016) compared to players who born later in the year group. This is known as the relative age effects (RAE), (Cobley et al., 2009) and research has shown negative effects for the younger players in the age group, who are exposed to fewer selection opportunities and have more chance to drop out from the sport (Hancock et al., 2013). There are also psychosocial issues related to the RAE because the player born earlier in the year group may be more experienced, and psychologically, cognitively, and socially advanced than the younger players (Doncaster et al., 2020).

In addition, Kelly et al. (2021) described how in professional sports there is often pressure from sponsors, coaches, and parents to provide more challenges and competition for the athletes. One of the solutions for this is for athletes to train and compete with older players, a strategy named as 'Playing Up'. Kelly et al. (2021) research showed the technical-tactical and social advantages of playing up, which may have a significant effect on their professional development. However, again, this strategy must take into consideration the different psycho-social development stages of the players that may not be aligned with their sporting talent.

Tamminen et al. (2012) stated that the participation of adolescents in sports can positively contribute to the development of their motor skills, physical and mental health, and psychosocial development. However, adolescent athletes reported number of stressors, including making errors, criticism from parents and teammates or coaches, pressure to preform, fear of failure, fear of injury, preforming well, viewing opponents cheating, coach and referee decisions, and organisational stressors, like travelling and balancing sport with education responsibilities.

The physical changes that adolescent athletes experience can affect the athletes' perceptions of their physical appearance and sporting abilities, maybe can also contribute to limiting eating practices. It is unclear how common eating disorders are in children and adolescent athletes and the age of their onset. As well as anorexia nervosa, and bulimia nervosa, there are subclinical conditions like a problematic eating behaviours and attitudes that do not meet the diagnostic criteria for eating disorders but are still related with severe physical, psychological, and behavioural difficulties. Diagnoses which relate specifically to athletes include anorexia athletica (losing of body mass or changes in weight for performance, dieting and excessive), exercise dependence, body dysmorphic disorder (preoccupation with perceived defects in appearance), and the female athlete triad (disordered eating, amenorrhea, and osteoporosis) (Tamminen et al., 2012).

Other causes of concern related to the psycho-social situation of adolescent athletes that researchers have identified are drug and alcohol abuse, use of steroids (Tamminen et al., 2012) and suicide (Edmonds et al., 2020).

The role of the Coach and Parental Involvement and Coping

Parents help to their children to understand and interpret their experiences in sports by acting as role models of behaviours, beliefs, and attitudes. However, young athletes reported that pressure from the parents was a stressor. Young athletes mentioned negative parental behaviours like being pushy, putting too much pressure on the athlete, controlling behaviours, shouting, and criticising the athlete, being over-involved, not affective, or negative communication, and wanting to win too much. Positive parent's

behaviours was positive communication, social support, giving motivation, developing psychological and social skills, and keeping sports in perspective. Researchers are trying to make suggestions to improve parental involvement in their children's sport (Tamminen et al., 2012).

Lee et al. (2017) identified terms describing coaching behaviours which were related to the level of social responsibility of the athletes. Democratic behaviour is when the coach brings an opportunity for the athlete to participate in the group decision making processes, like the game strategies, practice schedule, and team squad. Autocratic behaviour is when the coach makes all decisions and team members are expected to follow these decisions. When athletes felt that their coaches behaved more democratically and less autocratically, they were more motivated to take social responsibility.

According to Tamminen et al. (2012) coping means as ongoing conscious and deliberate attempts to manage external and internal demands that are thought to be challenging or beyond the resources of the person. Efficient coping contributes to successful sports performances and prevents dropping out from sports.

Nicolas et al. (2011) studied the effect of coaches with supportive behaviour on young athletes' coping and their sports achievement. Better sport achievement was observed when the coach directed towards task related coping (e.g., mental imagery, thought control, logical analysis, relaxation, effort expenditure and seeking social support). However, when the coach encouraged distraction-related coping (e.g., resignation and disengagement, expression unpleasant emotions) this approach led to reduced sport achievement. When the athletes experienced unsupportive coach behaviours before the competition, this led to disengagement related coping during competition. However,

supportive coach behaviours led to task oriented coping during competition and higher sports success.

Tamminen and Holt (2012) stated that athletes learn about coping from experiences of being exposed to multiple sports scenarios and by reflecting on how they coped. Coaches and parents provide a supportive environment for this process and use specific ways to help athletes learn about coping with questioning and reminding athletes about effective strategies, sharing their own experiences, breaking down stressful situations for athletes, providing perspective, talking about coping, making learning opportunities and specific instruction about coping.

In conclusion, adolescent athletes are exposed to more psycho-social challenges than their peers who are not involved in sports. Parents and coaches involved need to pay careful attention to how the athletes are coping with these challenges and support them by encouraging efficient coping strategies.

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