

Voices of Former High School Athletes:
Benefits and Drawbacks of Participation

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Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

By

Mark Stephen Amaro

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By

Mark Stephen Amaro

Fall, 2014

APPROVED FOR THE

SAINT MARY'S COLLEGE OF CALIFORNIA

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Candidate

Ed.D. Dissertation Committee:

Kathleen Taylor, Ph.D., Chair

Heidimarie Rambo, Ph.D.

Claire Williams, Ph.D.

Chris Sindt, Ph.D., Dean

Abstract

Voices of Former High School Athletes:
Benefits and Drawbacks of Athletic Participation
by
Mark Stephen Amaro
Doctorate of Education in Educational Leadership
Saint Mary's College of California, 2014
Kathleen Taylor, Ph.D., Chair

Most high school students have the opportunity to participate in athletic programs during a transformative time in their personal and academic development. Very little qualitative research examines how former high school athletes perceive these experiences after they graduate. In this descriptive, exploratory study, former athletes viewed their participation as a key experience that continues to affect them positively two to five years later. During semi-structured interviews, they spoke of having developed and maintained new capacities for leadership, greater personal accountability, and healthier overall lifestyle choices. They also learned how to relate to others, both on and off the athletic field in more authentic and caring ways, and thus how to establish and maintain lasting relationships. Many of these outcomes echo aspects of *self-concept* and *character development* as described in the literature. Although athletic coaches' behaviors were described as both positive and negative, participants were generally able to overcome the negative aspects. Especially when budget cuts threaten many non-academic and extra-curricular offerings, the results of this small and geographically limited study point to the need to further explore how high school athletics may have lasting positive effects on participants.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my family. I have been fortunate enough to have had support from my grandparents, parents, wife, and children along the doctoral journey. I would never have accomplished as much as I have without the support of all of them. Most importantly, I could not have done any of this without the support of my wife Jennifer. She always believed I would succeed even when I questioned myself. During my times of study and even today she continues to be the strength in my family. She was able give our daughters Lindsey and Ashley a mother that is second to none and I can never thank her enough for the sacrifice she went through to allow me to attend weekend classes.

I also dedicate this work to grandparents. My grandmother has always been there as a caring influence who listens, gives advice, and instilled within me a work ethic that has lead to my success. Through her patience and example, she taught me all things can be accomplished with vision, work ethic, and care. My grandfather pushed me to settle for nothing less than excellence. He always wanted to have a grandchild with a doctorate and I'm happy he can hold this dissertation in his hands. I thank him for believing in me.

My parents started me on the journey. My mother gave me an educational foundation, instilling in me a joy of reading and learning that continues today. My father gave me countless support, taught me the importance of recognizing the moment and gave me many opportunities to learn to see things from different perspectives.

Lastly, I dedicate this work to Lindsey and Ashley. Life is a great adventure and I hope this dissertation will influence your life positively.

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I am also thankful to my other committee members, Heidimarie Rambo and Claire Williams. Their recommendations were always thoughtful and made me see things from different perspectives. Thank you for helping me become a better researcher.

Thank you also to the faculty of St. Mary's College. As an undergraduate, I learned how to become a clear thinker. As a credential and master's student, I learned how to share my vision with others. As a doctoral candidate, I learned how to become a leader to help others.

Lastly, thank you to the superintendent, principal, the teaching staff, and students past, present, and future of the Hillside School District. I would name all of you directly, but I know you all appreciate the sanctity of research. It is an honor working with all of you and I look forward to facing together the challenge of making the world a better place.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

High schools today face many obstacles in transitioning students from adolescence to adulthood. Schools are responsible for both intellectual and physical development. According to Howie, Lukacs, Pastor, Reuben, and Mendola (2010), “Schools play a critical role in establishing lifelong healthy behavior patterns and school programs that encourage healthy behavior are valuable tools that can reduce health risks” (p. 124).

Today's high school students are thrust into a constantly evolving world in which they must balance academic class work, family dynamics, and social life to achieve skills that will enable them to navigate an increasingly complex world of adulthood. When students enter high school, they enter into a metaphorical pressure cooker that bombards them with a series of academic classes and state and national tests while they are at the same time trying to find and develop their student and group identities. Amidst this high stakes environment, high school students also have the option of voluntarily participating in high school athletic programs; however, the focus of raising state and national test scores in core academic subjects of Mathematics, English, and Science tends to devalue elective and extracurricular participation, thus bringing into question the value of high school athletics and how athletic programs should be funded. Many schools allocate as little as 3% of their total budgets for athletics and that is not even distributed equally between male and female participants (Whisenant, Pedersen, & Clavio, 2010). Though researchers believe athletics build character, self-esteem, and self-confidence, athletic leaders increasingly find themselves defending the benefits of their programs (Reeves, 2006).

Interscholastic athletics, athletics within a school system, has been studied for over forty years. The overwhelming majority of studies focus on collegiate athletics; much less is known about the high school athletic experience. What research there is appears to show high school athletic programs may develop character and identity, and help adolescents put winning and losing in perspective (Scantling & Lackey, 2005). Scantling and Lackey (2005) further argue that athletic programs give schools and campuses an identity and thus bridge a divide between students and teachers as they work together to face competition from rival schools.

Though high school graduates who return to visit their schools often emphasize how the high school experience, including athletics, was meaningful (Eide & Ronan, 2001), there is no research about whether athletics continues to play a role in their lives. When former students come to planned events such as homecomings or reunions or speak with teachers and coaches during informal classroom visitations, athletic alumni often informally credit athletic programs for teaching them valuable life skills that cannot be taught in the academic classroom; however no formal qualitative studies describe how the athletic experience affects participants (Fredricks, Alfeld, & Eccles, 2008).

Quantitative researchers suggest athletic participation is linked to improved socialization and greater confidence and belief in oneself (Howie et al., 2010). Other studies suggest gaining new perspective and a feeling of empowerment is especially true in the athletic experience:

The positive relationship between females' former high school athletic involvement and college completion is consistent with past research that has shown sport participation to be related to positive outcomes and more specifically on the relationship between athletics and academic success. (Troutman & Dufur, 2007, p. 458)

Still, little if any qualitative research has explored what athletics participants themselves say about their participation and what role it may play in helping them move from adolescence to adulthood. This chapter describes the background of the study, the problem, purpose, and research question, the methods and significance, and the theoretical framework. It also outlines assumptions, limitations, and delimitations, and provides a summary.

Background

High school athletics and their influence have been studied for well over four decades. As early as 1960, Coleman (1960) argued, “It is indisputable that interscholastic sports function to give the school and the community a collective identity” (p. 42). Collective identity and feeling pride in one’s school is still important to schools today; numerous communities support athletics through paid attendance at athletic events (Reeves, 2006). Nevertheless, how do these events and experiences affect the actual athletic participants and do they feel a part of the collective identity Coleman described?

Students today face an athletic and societal environment that does not send the clearest message of purpose. For example, some high school athletes participate primarily in pursuit of collegiate scholarships while others see the possibility that lucrative professional contracts will alleviate the need for further education. There are also positive role models within professional athletics who use their monetary resources to help improve communities, while at the same time, other make national headlines for unsportsmanlike and illegal activities. Furthermore, high school athletics participation is sometimes touted as a possible solution to the increasing obesity rates among young people in the United States.

Even though high school athletics are correlated with various positive academic outcomes, athletics cannot reliably be used as a predictor of future academic success for all

students. At best, Eide and Ronan (2001) argued in an economic analysis of athletics participation in high school and beyond, athletics apparently lead to better collegiate academic success for women; “For males our results are somewhat mixed. The results for white males suggest the conclusions of previous research studies are suspect, at least as far as the effect of varsity sport participation on college graduation is concerned” (p. 440). Similarly, in a longitudinal study of athletic participation and adult development, Spreitzer (1994) “found no clear association between athletic participation as a high school senior and psychological well-being 6 years later” (p. 385).

In the area of learning appropriate adult behaviors, however, current research is beginning to reveal some positive aspects of the athletic experience. Parents and coaches have the greatest influence on athletic participants when they model the behavior they want to see. Shields, LaVoi, Bredemeier, and Power (2007) studied the effect coaches have on participants:

Concurring with the cliché “actions speak louder than words,” [this study] suggests that it may be the coaches’ behavior, rather than their expressed attitude, that matters most to athletes. If the coach wants to have a positive influence, he or she may need to uphold high standards of professional and ethical behavior. (p. 757)

Lee, Whitehead, Ntoumanis, and Hatzigeorgiadis (2008) are more specific about the kinds of sports environment that is most likely to positively influence student athletes:

If sport is to act as an agent of moral growth, coaches, teachers, and parents should promote moral and competence values rather than status values. This can be achieved by positive modeling on the part of significant others and encouraging both the understanding of moral dilemmas in sport and the importance of making self-referenced evaluations of success. (p. 605)

This supportive environment needs to be further studied from the student athlete perspective.

What do they believe has had the greatest impact on them and their behaviors?

Studies of the impacts of high school athletic programs on participants are not as abundant as those which explore the impact of standardized tests, teacher efficacy, or parental involvement. The research that does exist regarding athletics shows both positive (Troutman & Dufur, 2007) and negative aspects of participation (Spreitzer, 1994; Eide & Ronan, 2001). Although some researchers tout benefits of athletics including lessening social anxiety and better healthy behaviors later in life (Eide & Ronan, 2001; Troutman & Dufur, 2007), there is no literature which reveals how participants describe the effects. Given how little definitive research exists on the subject of high school athletics, and even less that has explored the perceptions of the young athletes, themselves, this study will examine what the athletic experience is to participants.

Statement of Problem

Research has shown some impacts of athletic experience on the classroom and life beyond high school, but these studies fail to include the athletes' perspective (Dodge & Lambert, 2009; Eide & Ronan, 2001; Spreitzer, 1994; Troutman & Dufur, 2007). There are no qualitative high school athletic studies which focus on revealing what the athletic experience is to participants. With athletic programs facing increased scrutiny, the advantages and disadvantages of athletic participation are becoming more of a focus for decision makers who control funding of such programs. There is an abundance of athletic research regarding success and failures of collegiate students and athletes. Though some research has explored the effects on middle school students from participating in athletic programs and other studies have examined collegiate academic success gained through high school athletic participation, very little focuses on telling

the story of the high school athletic participants. More research is needed in the area of high school athletics and this study adds to the field.

Purpose of Study

There are few, if any, studies that focus on revealing the voices of high school athletic participants. This descriptive study explored the participants' high school athletic experiences and the ways in which such experiences affected their lives in high school and after high school both inside and outside of athletics. It also sought to reveal in what ways their athletic experiences influenced them in their post-high school lives.

Research Questions

Two questions drove this study.

- 1) How do student athletes describe their high school athletic experience?
- 2) How do their former experiences as high school student athletes affect them in their current lives?

Summary of Methods

Epistemologically, a constructivist approach is most in line with a study that seeks to examine the perspectives of the participants and the meaning they make of their experiences. This exploratory, qualitative study describes athletic participation from the perspective of fifteen high school alumni from three suburban high schools. The participants in this study had participated in varsity sports for at least two years of their high school career. All participants completed high school within the past three years. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. Using the constant comparative method as described by Saldana (2009), interviews were analyzed and common themes were reported along with any significant differences.

Significance of Study

Studies that focus on athletic participants and what they say about the athletic experience may be helpful to decision makers. Since the 1980's, it has been increasingly difficult for researchers to gain access to high school athletic participants for research as many parents are hesitant to have their children become part of research (Coakley & Pike, 2009). Nevertheless, those who participate in athletics offer a distinct perspective that will enable decision makers to better understand the value of athletic programs. This study revealed how participants felt about their athletic experience two to five years after their high school participation. This shift to a participant view drove this study and may suggest whether athletic programs are worthy of continued or increased funding; it may also open new avenues of research. Given its focus on adolescence, the high school athletic experience may have unique features; studying what participants say may inform the design of high school environments that stimulate academic growth and personal development. The conclusions may therefore be a foundation for renewed emphasis on the importance of athletics, and a vehicle for communicating athletic impacts to a wider audience who will therefore examine issues of athletic funding from a more informed perspective.

Focusing on how students, themselves, perceive the effects of their athletic participation may suggest connections to aspects of change and growth that have not previously emerged. In what ways might the athletic experience contribute to such change or growth? This could lend itself to the growing body of adolescent developmental research. This also may provide a new perspective to decision makers who control the funding and survival of athletics programs.

High school is a developmentally transitory period for youth during which they begin to move away from a self-absorbed, typical adolescent focus to learning and responding to the

responsibilities of adulthood and community (Kegan, 1994). Although the scope of this study is too limited to discover possible effects on adolescent development such as those described by Kegan (1994), it may provide a better understanding of how individuals see and perceive the world around them—the elements of self-concept theory.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that informs this study comes from the self-concept theory originated by Shavelson et al. (1976). How athletic participants see themselves and how they perceive their development is a critical aspect of the theory and is an area that may apply to high school athletics. Support and challenge are essential to student growth and these elements of experience may emerge in relation to development of self-concept.

Assumptions

As a veteran coach and athletic director, my bias is that athletic experience has many benefits for high school athletes. I assume that it helps them find direction and focus.

Furthermore, as the athletic director of one of the selected sample sites, I have had interactions with some of the likely participants in the study. The disadvantage of these existing relationships was the potential for this to influence analysis of the data; the potential advantage was that the participants may have been more open and honest in their interviews. As described in the *Methods* section, awareness of this potential pitfall will guide the design of my data collection, analysis, and interpretation, with special attention to possible bias.

Delimitations and Limitations

Purposeful sampling seemed the most appropriate for the study, but convenience also played a role. As a full-time teacher, I had limited access to resources that would support a wider research base. High schools across the nation field a number of sports. Some are

individual in nature such as golf, tennis, and track while others are more team based such as football, basketball, and softball. Although this study could have focused on only one particular sport or even gender, I chose to use a balanced sample of male and female participants which came from a wide selection of athletics offered by the schools. Such research has been troublesome to gather as acknowledged by Coakley and Pike (2009), “[Since the 1980s] parents have increasingly objected to anyone studying their children’s lives” (p. 149). This small and localized sample is a limitation of this study.

In addition, the location of the geographic location as well as the schools’ demographics are also a limitation in the study. The schools attended by the participants were suburban affluent populations. Diversity did exist within the populations that is described in the sample section of Chapter 3; however, the participants in the study were predominantly white, another study limitation. In my experience with the participants, they were not students of record for me as former students, nor did I coach any of them on teams; however, they did know me as a district athletic director.

Summary

This chapter introduced and described proposed study and provided a general background of recent literature and trends in the high school athletics field. Participation in athletics may empower students to develop critical skills to succeed in not only academic subjects, but to better understand and develop themselves. This study will explore how participants describe their athletic experiences and how these experiences affect them in their current lives today. Gaining a better understanding of high school athletic experiences will build on existing literature surrounding high school athletics and create a clearer picture of the benefits and drawbacks of athletic participation.

The next chapter will focus on a review of the literature giving this study historical context, background information, placing it appropriately in the current field of study.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

The research questions which drove this study are: 1) How do former high school athletes describe their high school experience? 2) How do their former experiences as high school student athletes affect them in their current lives? Studying what participants say and how they make meaning of their experiences may give direction in finding ways to stimulate academic, social, and physical growth. It may also help us learn more about adolescent development and add to existing empirical literature. Such research may communicate the high school athletic experience to a wider audience as well. This qualitative study will respond to the call of researchers that have been advocating for more studies which focus on high school athletic participation and the impact on participants. (Whitson, 1976; Bain, 1995; Mahoney & Kearns, 1997; Kerry & Armour, 2000; Blomfield & Barber, 2009; Hartman, Sullivan, & Nelson, 2012).

Athletic programs are complex with many facets that are not yet fully understood. Wilson, Gottfredson, Cross, Rorie, and Connell (2010) reveal the challenges researchers face in creating a clearer picture of the athletic experience:

Many characteristics of an activity are likely to affect whether there will be positive or negative effects, or any effect, on later outcomes. These characteristics include structure, setting, content, extent of participation by youth, interactions by staff, characteristics of staff, and the extent of supervision. (p. 685)

This Literature Review focuses on four overarching themes in current research on the athletic experience: benefits of athletic participation, drawbacks of athletic participation, self-concept, and the role of the coach. Understanding these facets of the athletic experience is

important, especially as this study gives voice to the high school athletic athletes and how they feel they are affected by their participation

Sources

To gather information, I used databases including ERIC, Education FT, the Social Science and PSYCInfo. I used descriptors which included high school athletics, holding environments, sports participation, extracurricular participation, athletic coaching, athletics and environments, constructive developmental theory, coaching tenure, athletic benefits, athletic detriments, athletic consequences, phenomenology, athletics, self-concept, athletics and self-concept, and participant voice.

A brief history of high school athletics

Understanding the origins of high school athletics helps clarify and give purpose to this study. It also serves as a framework to reveal society's anticipated goals and outcomes of athletic participation. Since the early 1900's athletic programs have become integral parts of high schools. Given late 19th century population shifts from rural to urban settings that included an influx of new immigrants to the United States, adult leaders were concerned about the moral deterioration of young boys in cities; athletic programs were thought to create positive opportunities for students to release negative energies:

Having no opportunity of working off their superfluous energies by wholesome games as nature intended that they should and as boys do in the country, the boys of the streets were led to join "gangs," and drifted into all descriptions of vicious practices, which made far too many of them rowdies, and frequently criminals. (Wingate, 1908, p. 166)

Athletic programs seemed to address the needs of city communities as they created supervised environments that created a perception that boys could stay out of trouble and reinforce preexisting “American” values (Rader, 2009).

These initial high school athletic programs lacked adult oversight and many emphasized winning above character development (Rader, 2009). There were no academic prerequisites to participate and the behavior of these young athletes during competition was often questionable. In response, high school administrators created the National Federation of State High School Athletic Associations (now known today as the National Federation of High Schools or NFHS), the governing body of athletic activities. This newfound organization was charged with giving direction on how to create athletic programs that would teach students how to deal with life after graduation and also develop character, an ambiguous term used to describe moral development (Rader, B. 2009).

Although athletic programs were initially designed to target relatively underprivileged city youth, some believed athletic programs should have other purposes, as well. There was also a belief that participation in athletics would help “to turn ‘over-feminized’ boys from affluent families into assertive, competitive achievement-oriented young men who would become effective leaders in business, politics, and the military” (Coakley & Pike, 2009). Little attention was given to girls’ possible athletic needs and most had no opportunity to participate in high school athletics teams. Not until Title IX in 1973 did schools reexamine the perceived benefits of athletics to all participants, regardless of gender.

High school athletic programs evolved in response to social pressures. As the workforce became more industrial and urbanized, schools began to take a more formative role in teaching values in non-academic settings.

Instead of defining sports simply as enjoyable diversions, people gradually came to see them as tools for achieving important goals such as economic productivity, national loyalty, and the development of admirable character traits, especially among males.

(Coakley & Pike, 2009)

It is through this historical lens that we find three themes in the literature of high school athletics: the overall benefits of participation, the development of self-concept, and the role played by adults, specifically coaches.

Benefits of athletic participation

There are many reported positive effects to athletic participation include, “socialization, character building, educational and social attainment” (Hartmann, Sullivan, & Nelson, 2012, p. 113). To understand the effects of high school athletics participation, it is important to examine the many facets of the athletic experience. Not all students are able to participate in athletics. Of those that do participate, athletic participation is seen as an activity that provides various positive benefits. Schools set academic requirements for students to participate. Due to these academic requirements participants become part of peer groups that are more academically focused (Eide & Ronan, 2001; Fredricks & Eccles, 2008; Dodge & Lambert, 2008). Athletics has been reported to improve academic and economical success (Eide & Ronan, 2001; Howard, 2010). Additional positive benefits include economic success after high school, higher academic scores in both high school and college, lowered rates of depression, increased resiliency, health habits, physical benefits, self-confidence, enhanced leadership capabilities, lessening social anxiety and increasing self-belief. There are also gender specific benefits. The reviews of athletic benefits as described by current literature are presented here.

Academic pathways. The major governing body of high school athletics is the National Federation of High Schools (NFHS). Through this governing body, the NFHS sets up committees of coaches, administrators, and officials throughout the nation that review and set rules for their battery of sanctioned sports and provide educational opportunities for the nations school leaders. One of their more prominent publications is “High School Today,” a monthly magazine that covers current and important issues that face athletics programs and their leaders. In a recent editorial published in the magazine, Howard (2010) describes various benefits of athletic participation: “better attendance records, lower dropout rates, higher grade-point averages, improved self-esteem and self-confidence, and preparation for a successful career” (p. 10). Although this is not a scholarly journal, it is viewed as a source of meaningful information for those who work with high school athletes. All of the attributes Howard lists above contribute to the success of athletes during and after high school. This study will provide scholarly documentation of such benefits as well as add individual testimonials from actual participants.

Another particular study addressed academic success after high school and examined future economic earnings of athletes. Eide and Ronan (2001) examined the athletic experience looking for economic predictors of success. They used the sample from National Center for Education Statistics, High School and Beyond from 1980 and four subsequent follow-ups ending in 1992. Overall, they found the general male athletic participant population, inclusive of multiple race categories, finished college at a higher rate than the male population that did not participate in athletics. They did go on to further subdivide their study which produced interesting results as well. For instance, they found different benefits for different races and genders of participants. For example, white female participants were more likely to graduate from college and attend classes regularly (Eide & Ronan, 2001). Surprisingly, white males may

have a reduced rate of graduation while black males were more likely to finish college (Eide & Ronan, 2001). Nevertheless, Eide and Ronan did call for additional studies to help further illuminate their findings. This study will help to provide clarity on how athletics affected the participants with the possibility of revealing academic and economic success.

High school athletic peer grouping benefits. Researchers have studied whether athletics can be used as a predictor of future positive social interaction, better health habits, increased leadership opportunities, and an activity that can lessen social anxiety (Eide & Ronan, 2001; Fredricks & Eccles, 2008; Dodge & Lambert, 2008; Dobosz & Beaty, 1999; Dimech & Seiler, 2011). Their findings depend upon being around other participants who fulfill the academic requirements to participate in high school athletics. It is for this reason that this section is composed of athletic peer grouping benefits as students who do not participate in athletics might have different results. It is important to hear from athletes what makes the team experience unique and how it affects the participants. This study will bring voice to the experience and further clarify the findings of the researchers in this literature review.

Fredricks and Eccles' (2008) comprehensive longitudinal study followed the sample population of 1,047 students beginning in their seventh grade year and concluding in the eleventh grade. The study was complex revealing multiple facets of a wide variety of extracurricular and out of school activities including the athletic experience. For example, specific populations derived different benefits from athletic participation. In the case of lower socioeconomic status families, individuals who participated in athletics found themselves surrounded by more students who tended to focus on academically succeeding in school (Fredricks & Eccles, 2008). They also had additional findings such as individuals from higher socioeconomic status families experienced benefits of lower depression (Fredricks & Eccles,

2008). In all cases except for those of European American 8th graders, participants experienced benefits of increased resiliency and their ability to develop plans to figure out problems they faced in their daily lives (Fredricks & Eccles, 2008). This dissertation will give voice to athletic participants as they describe the relationships participants had with their teammates.

Dodge and Lambert (2008) were also interested in finding out how athletics affected participants. They completed a quantitative study that explored if athletics participation could affect healthy behaviors later in life. Their study used the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health from 2003. The sample was made up of 80 high schools and over 15,000 students who had varying levels of athletics participation ranging from thinking about participating to being a member of a varsity level sport. They found 57% of the sample planned or participated in athletics and that these students had a more positive self-belief. This trait was also associated with better physical health six years after high school or, in their exact terms, “young adulthood” (Dodge & Lambert, 2008, p. 819).

Here, Dodge and Lambert (2008) discuss the significance of their findings:

Results indicate that participation in sports during adolescence is associated with increased levels of physical activity and higher ratings of subjective health in young adulthood. These effects are independent of participation in other forms of general physical activity and suggest that the sporting environment during adolescence has a unique influence on health behaviors during young adulthood. This study is one of the first to provide empirical evidence that the relationship between participation in sports during adolescence and adult physical activity is unique from engagement in any general type of physical activity. (Dodge & Lambert, 2008, p. 822).

Though physical benefits are immediately derived from participation in athletics, there was never before clear empirical evidence that such participation affected participants at least six years after their high school careers were over. Not only do athletes benefit from positive self-belief, but also healthier exercise habits and more positive self-appraisal of health status.

In another Dodge and Lambert (2009) study that focused on peer groupings and benefits of athletics, they found growth in self-belief. They studied junior high school athletes to see what effect participation had on the students' physical well-being. They posited that psychological development may improve through physical activity including sports (Dodge & Lambert, 2009). They surveyed 8,152 students from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health to see if students had a more positive self-belief one year later and if they were more likely to participate in beneficial physical exercise habits six years later. Although the researchers could not find a correlation between physical activity and later physical health benefits, they suggested that there may be an association between sport activity and psychological health.

Participation in general physical activities during adolescence were unrelated to subjective health in young adulthood in the present study. It is possible that participation in sports during adolescence is positively associated with psychological health and mental well-being whereas general physical activities do not confer similar benefits. (Dodge & Lambert, 2009, p. 825)

More importantly, and related to the Fredricks and Eccles (2008) study, they found students gained a stronger sense of self-belief:

Results revealed that positive self-beliefs partially mediated the relationship between participation in sports and physical activity and subjective health in young adulthood.

This suggests that the gains in positive self-beliefs that result from adolescents' participation in sports are not solely responsible for the positive relationships between participation in sports and the young adult health outcomes of physical activity and subjective health. Nonetheless, findings indicate that participation in an organized sport was associated with more positive self-beliefs 1 year later suggesting participation in sports can facilitate the development of a more positive sense of self. (Dodge & Lambert, 2009, p. 825)

Self-belief is not specifically identified by researchers as part of self-concept; however, to have confidence in oneself could be a foundation for feeling positive in evaluating the surrounding environment. Here, Dodge and Lambert (2009) take Fredricks and Eccles (2008) a step further. Participation may actually increase levels of self-belief in students. Furthermore, the findings on self-belief lead to the next theme of the literature review, self-concept. This dissertation will also seek to explain the nuances of the actual moments and experiences in which students noticed development of physical benefits and how it affected their perception.

Athletics is a social activity that has been linked to lessening social anxiety as well. This dissertation may be able to give further clarity to how participants developed bonds with other participants and further explain the variable of anxiety. Dimech and Seiler (2011) completed a study in Europe about social anxiety within elementary school children. They focused on team sports and if participating in such sports was more likely to alleviate issues of social anxiety, which is defined as fear that occurs during social or competitive settings in which individuals are being observed by others. They found that youth who participated in team activities were less likely to experience the symptoms of social anxiety (Dimech & Seiler, 2011).

Athletics depends on social connections built with teammates and coaches.

Consequently, this also provides participants an opportunity to develop communication and leadership skills. Dobosz and Beaty's (1999) gave the Leadership Ability Evaluation (LAE) 50 item instrument to 30 athletes and 30 non-athletes. They generated a sample pool of 100 from a Chicago area school that had a school population of over 1000 students. In the study they defined leadership as, "...the capacity to guide others in the achievement of a common goal. Decisiveness, determination, interpersonal and organizational aptitude, loyalty, self-efficacy, and self-discipline are considered some of the attributes of effective leaders" (Dobosz & Beaty, 1999, p. 220). They found, "In particular, there is the possibility that athletics offers young people . . . the chance to improve leadership ability, speeding progress toward the achievement of societal equality" (Dobosz & Beaty, 1999, p. 220). Essentially, they found that athletic participants learn leadership skills. It is critical to hear from the voice of actual participants so we can better understand how they understand the benefits of peer groupings and how it affects their physical and intellectual growth.

Gender specific benefits. It is important to understand that athletics not only affects participants, but it may also have affect participants differently. In the research, we see studies that help to define the benefits of participation by grouping findings to reveal the benefits experienced by those of different genders. This dissertation will give voice to both male and female athletic participants to discover what benefits they found.

Empowering participants to be more confident is a key finding in Troutman and Dufur's (2007) study. Troutman and Dufur (2007) narrowed the focus to female high school athletic participants. They found females who had successful athletic experiences were more likely to have successful academic experiences in college. More specifically, the researchers found links

between high school athletic participation and collegiate success for women, particularly college completion:

The positive relationships between females' former high school athletics involvement and college completion is consistent with past research that has shown sport participation to be related to positive outcomes and more specifically on the relationship between athletics and academic success" (Troutman & Dufur, 2007, p. 458).

Elliot, Moe, Goldberg, DeFrancesco, Durham, and Hix-Small (2007) did a study on athletes and eating disorders and found secondary results about athletic benefits for female participants. They had 2,090 female athletes complete questionnaires identifying their eating habits and athletic participation. Their primary goal was to test the Athletes Targeting Healthy Exercise and Nutrition Alternatives (ATHENA) program and compare it to the Athletes Training and Learning to Avoid Steroids program (ATLAS). In their surveys, they came across data that revealed higher self-esteem and improved mood as major influences in creating healthy habits. One of the limits of the research is that the study did not specify whether the participants were part of team sports (such as football, basketball, or softball) or individual sports (such as track and field, wrestling, or swimming). This could have brought more clarity to discover to what extent different sports affect participants. Nevertheless, with no sport classification for the participants, they did notice health benefits:

The sport team has several features that support its use for health promotion. Team members are a bonded peer group, where healthy behaviors and attitudes can be modeled and reinforced. The program's peer-facilitated format parallels player-led training activities that are common in athletics. (Elliot et al., 2006, p. 72)

Not only did the participants learn habits that help them succeed nutritionally, they also built relationships with other participants and coaches that positively influenced their self-esteem in a supportive environment of peers.

In the Taylor and Turek (2010) study, they noticed higher levels of self-esteem in females as well. In their study of 1976 African American female students, they found “social status and the subsequent positive interpersonal interactions, may have increased as a result of sports participation and this then leads to enhanced self-esteem” (p. 327). This is not to say that all benefits the researchers found were positive and the drawbacks of athletic participation will be explored in another subtheme.

Just as there have been findings about benefits for female athletic participants, there have also been studies focusing on the male athletic participant experience. In an unpublished doctoral dissertation, Sitkowski (2008) examined 249 high school athletic participants’ GPA. He wanted to see if there was a link between athletic participation and higher grades. He found male participants had statistically significant differences during the season compared to when they were out of season; in other words, male participants had higher GPA’s during the times they played sports. He thought there may be a correlation; that student athletes in their sport season would have higher GPA’s than those who were out of season. In looking at 149 sophomore and junior boys, he determined which athletes were in season, which were out, and collected the GPA’s of the entire sample at the various grade reporting periods. He also suggested that since athletes developed more positive self-image and self-perception, this may be a cause for the higher GPA during the sport season. How individuals evaluate and see themselves is a key component to self-concept (Shavelson et al., 1976). Self-concept is a theme in this literature review explored later; however, this study will seek to give voice to participants who

qualitatively explain how their self-concept is, or continues to be affected by their athletic participation.

Drawbacks of athletic participation

There are also a number of studies that explore the drawbacks of athletic participation. Athletic participation has been explored as possibly a lower level of moral behavior, physical injury, and psychological stress that can lead to lower morals and a higher possibility of engaging in risk taking behaviors. (Hagenbaugh, 2010; Waldron & Crane, 2005; Wilson, Pritchard & Schaeffer, 2004; Tayler & Turek, 2011; Stracciolini, Casciano, Friedman, Stein, Meehan III, & Micheli, 2014; Storch, Storch, Killiany & Roberti, 2004; Ransdell, Hildebrand, Spear, & Lucas, 2007). It is important to understand these findings so as to better understand the perspective of the athletic participants and the inherent drawbacks they face due to their participation. This dissertation will help clarify these dangers by giving voice to actual participants.

A lowered state of morals. One of the studies that focused on drawbacks of athletic participation was Hagenbaugh's dissertation (2010) which found male contact sports may be the cause of lower moral development among males. Although not fully conclusive, his research hinted that "The high contact and aggressive sports that males tend to participate in (i.e., football, wrestling) may have impacted their moral reasoning" (p. 77). Hagenbaugh found no definitive psychological development, moral development, or increased success in graduating from college as a result of high school sports participation. The most he could find was that different sports may affect participants differently which was already discussed earlier in this review. Through the participants' voice, this dissertation will help reveal how athletes make decisions and clarify the literature.

Physical injury. If high school athletic programs were originally designed in the late 1800s, “to underpin a healthy workforce, develop fit men for national defense and socialize male youth into the modern social order” (Coakley & Pike, 2009), these goals are not always accomplished. It is important to understand the drawbacks of the athletic experience and how physical injury can affect participants during and after participation. Athletic programs can be damaging as some face physical injuries and psychological stress.

Participation in athletic programs is not without physical risk. One of the legal duties of high school athletic programs is to have students and parents sign waivers to ensure they understand the risk of injury. In one of the more comprehensive recent studies, Stracciolini, Casciano, Friedman, Stein, Meehan III, and Micheli (2014) examined data that looked at athletic injuries. Although they did not specifically focus on high school athletic injury as they looked at data of children from 5-17, they did clarify that their data did examine those who claimed the injury originally occurred during athletic activity. In gathering their data, they looked at a 5% random data sample of 2133 patients, half of which were under 12 years old. They found overuse injuries and lower extremity injuries to be most prevalent:

Slightly over half of the patients (53%) in the cohort of 2133 cases were seen for overuse injuries (62.5%). In contrast, males were treated more for traumatic injuries (58.2%) versus overuse injuries. The majority of patients in the entire cohort (males and females) were seen for lower extremity injuries (60.2%). (Stracciolini et al., 2014, p. 967)

Physical activity can lead to injury and this is one of the potential drawbacks of athletic participation. It is of note that the researchers did go on to say that one of the methods of intervention is to have “skilled training and conditioning in preventing youth sports injuries”

(Stracciolini et al., 2014, p. 971). This could be an area of potential education for coaches, parents, and participants to lessen the risks involved with athletic participation.

Psychological stress. Being part of athletic teams may be exciting at the outset, but such commitment also brings new levels of challenge. For example, students have to learn to better balance their time and deal with the stress of being part of the team. Although there are few if any studies that reveal the stresses of high school sport participants, there is research on how stress affects collegiate athletes which is reported by Storch, Storch, Killiany and Roberti (2005):

When athletes enter elite levels of sports (e.g. intercollegiate), there are numerous associated stressors. For example, elite intercollegiate athletes, who typically excelled in high school, must not contend with increased competition level, the vicissitudes of competing for and maintaining a starting position, and negotiating relationships with teammates and coaches.” which is reported in the Storch, Storch, Killiany, and Roberti study. (p. 87)

Compared with high school athletes, collegiate athletes may face different stressors; however, participants do face competition to retain their roles on high school athletic teams and have to negotiate relationships with teammates and coaches.

What is also of note in the Storch et al. (2005) study are the outcomes as they relate to male and female athletes when compared to their non-athletic counterparts:

The proportions of female athletes reporting clinically significant scores on measures of alcohol problems, depression, and social anxiety, and deficient scores on social support, were not significantly higher than the proportions among female non-athletes and male athletes and non-athletes. These results suggest that, in this sample, mental health problems were not especially prominent among female athletes. (p.94)

Athletes do face stressors that are different than their non-athletic counterparts, but their frequency of reporting problems did not measure as a statistically significant difference. This was only a sample of 398 students from one school in the southeastern United States; however, it does give some insight as to the forms of stress elite high school athletes may face as they progress towards collegiate participation. What is known is the stress psychological stress produced by athletics can sometimes lead to risky behaviors

Risky behaviors. Another facet of psychological stress is the encouragement of risk taking behaviors. Sometimes, the drawbacks in athletics affect males and females differently. One of the reasons has been society's continued emphasis on male sports:

Scanning the sports section of any newspaper or viewing ESPN's SportsCenter clearly reveals that men's power sports dominate the media coverage. These men's sports are cast as the ideal to be achieved. For example, some people believe that until many women "dunk" during basketball games, the WNBA will not achieve the same popularity as the NBA. (Waldron & Crane, 2005, p. 316)

This has lead female athletes to engage in more risky health behaviors such as unhealthy eating to change to either gain a more societally rewarded sexualized image or usage of steroids and supplements to increase competitive advantage (Waldron & Crane, 2005). Both of these outcomes can have lasting negative effects on participants.

Another drawback that is experienced differently by male and female collegiate athletes relates to drinking alcohol. In the Wilson, Pritchard, and Schaffer (2004) study, they found different motivations for alcohol consumption:

For the participants in this study, the most significant predictor for drinking behaviors in both collegiate female athletes and nonathletes and male nonathletes was "drinking to

cope.” For these groups, the use of alcohol as “a way to feel better” was significantly related to the quantity consumed, the frequency of alcohol consumption, and the frequency of intoxication. . . . However, for male athletes in this study, coping tactics were largely unrelated to frequency of alcohol consumption, frequency of intoxication, or the quantity of alcohol consumed. Instead, for male athletes, drinking behavior tended to depend more on social influences rather than on alcohol’s use as a coping mechanism. (p. 272)

Like many college students, athletes engage in alcohol consumption; however, female athletes do so to find ways to feel better while male athletes do so to conform to peer pressure.

Taylor and Turek (2010) also studied how substance abuse affects athletes. They noticed differences in substance abuse when examining school locations:

Participants who played sports in rural areas reported higher levels of overall peer drug use for all types of substances (i.e., alcohol, marijuana, and other illicit drugs). In urban settings, overall peer use rates were lower, but this was only specific to marijuana and other drugs, not alcohol. (p. 328)

Although the researchers found increased levels of substance abuse, they did note that such findings should be carefully examined as athletics may not be the determinant factor.

Athletes are encouraged to push their physical limits to see the limits of their potential. Ransdell, Hildebrand, Spear, and Lucas (2007) acknowledge these risk factors here:

If athletes are going to be successful, they have to be risk-takers willing to push themselves to their limits. Almost daily, they risk pain and injury, whether in competition or training. Athletes tend to subscribe to the “work hard, play hard” mentality, which often translates into “partying hard.” (p. 6)

This is a different psychological mindset. The adults that athletes interact with encourage risk taking. As the researchers acknowledge, risk taking is not always negative, but it can have consequences when it becomes emphasized to young people who do not yet understand their own limits. It creates another layer of psychological stress that athletes must face.

Drawbacks of athletic participation are present in the literature and are a source of concern. This dissertation will give voice to what the athletes feel are drawbacks of participation which will further validate or clarify the studies in this literature review. What we do know is that athletes learn to find themselves when interacting with their teammates and this is the next subtheme, discovering self-belief through development of self-concept.

Self-Concept

As the theoretical framework of this dissertation derives from self-concept studies, I begin with a brief look at the origin of the theory. Shavelson, Hubner, and Stanton (1976) defined self-concept as a new psychological construct with their benchmark study. Essentially, *self-concept* is how individuals think about or see themselves. It is different from *self-esteem*, which is how individuals feel about themselves. “Broadly defined, self-concept is a person’s perceptions of him- or herself. These perceptions are formed through experience with and interpretations of one’s environment” (Marsh & Shavelson, 1985, p. 107). As such, self-concept is influenced by a variety of variables including both successful and failed past experiences, positive and negative reinforcement behaviors from other people, and even self-esteem. The literature reviewed in this theme reveals athletics participation affects self-concept in two ways, academic and nonacademic. Furthermore, given the limited number of studies focusing on high school participants, there will follow a brief examination of pertinent pre-high school studies.

Consequently, the categories in this theme explore athletic participation and how it affects academic and nonacademic self-concept with regard to elementary and middle school athletes.

Widely used in the field of educational psychology, self-concept is multifaceted and hierarchical (Shavelson et al., 1976). *Multifaceted* refers to concepts that can be applied to various categories. As individuals mature, they develop increasingly multifaceted self-concepts. *Hierarchical* refers to the fact that one's self-concept about a broad category of experience, such as academic self-concept, can be influenced by one's self-concept in the particular areas it comprises, such as Mathematics and English. Similarly, one's non-academic self-concept is affected by one's peer and family self-concepts (Figure 1).

Much of the research over the past thirty years has examined academic self-concept using quantitative instruments developed for particular sublevels of academic self-concept. The most intensely studied sublevels of academic self-concept focus on English and Mathematics.

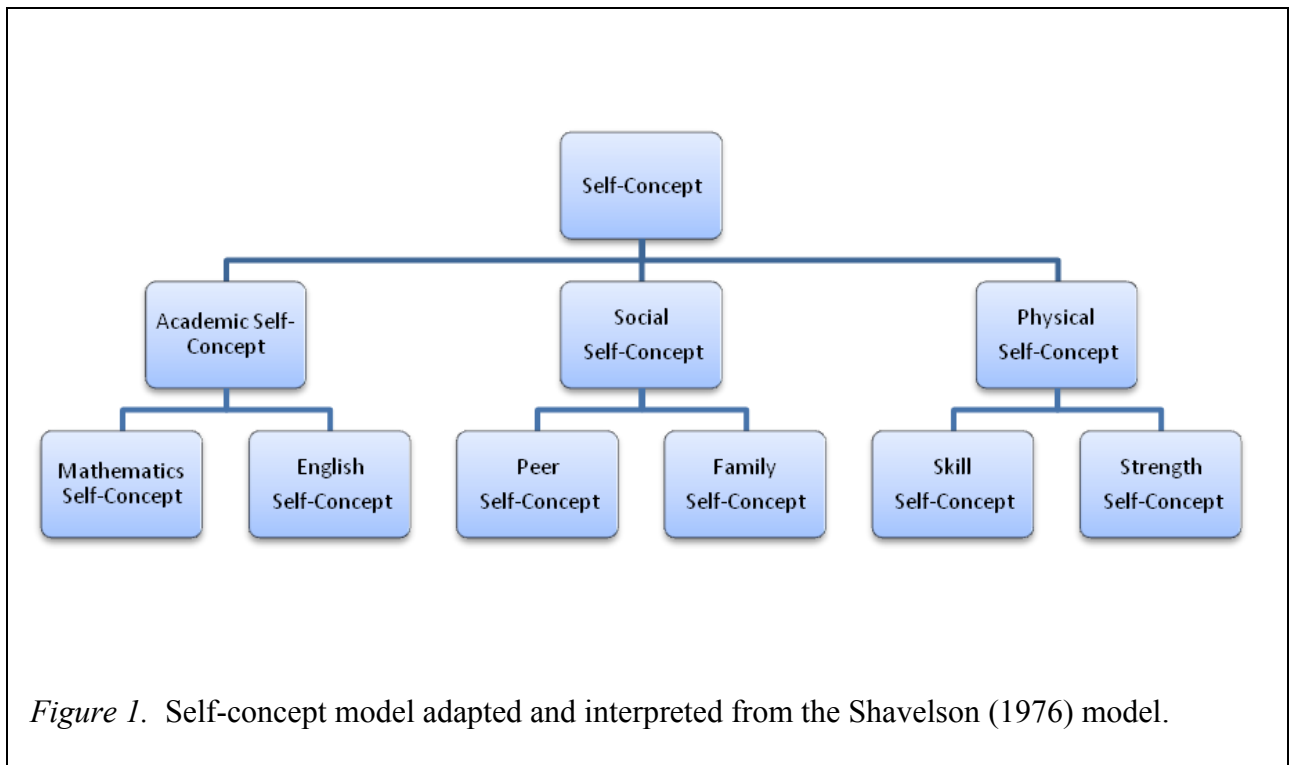


Figure 1. Self-concept model adapted and interpreted from the Shavelson (1976) model.

A wealth of research has explored such topics as the relationship between Mathematics and English self-concepts and Math and English grades. Relatively little research has explored nonacademic self-concept, though some posit further sublevels of nonacademic self-concept. Byrne (2002), for example, identifies social and physical self-concept as sublevels of the nonacademic domain. The following subsections examine academic and social self-concept studies as they relate to athletic participation.

Academic self-concept and athletic participation. Somewhat surprisingly, there is limited and relatively inconsequential research specifically connecting athletics with physical and social self-concept in high school students. However, two specific studies focus on academic self-concept and how sports participation affected adolescents. In the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS), Fejgin (1994) examined 22,696 tenth grade students who were asked to rank their own level of sports participation on a four point likert scale. The scale included nonparticipation in sports, participation in intramural sports, participation in junior varsity (JV) or varsity sports, or was a sport team captain. The researchers correlated these independent variables with self-concept and educational aspirations. One of the key findings suggested positive effects of high school athletic participation on several variables:

[It] appears to contribute to increased levels of grades, self-concept, locus of control, and educational aspirations, and to decreased levels of discipline problems. In fact, in each of these models (numerical tables) except for educational aspirations, the effect of athletic participation is greater than that of family income, parent education, gender, and [ethnic] origin. (Fejgin, 1994, p. 218)

Most importantly to this dissertation, participation correlates with self-concept.

In another study, Marsh (1992) looked at academic self-concept in terms of extracurricular activities including athletic participation. Using the Total Extracurricular Athletic Participation (TEAP) from the High School and Beyond database of 14, 825 students, he found 41 % of the sample participated in some type of high school athletic activity. Among these particular students, participation in athletics was correlated with improved academic self-concept in addition to several other positive outcomes:

TEAP is favorably associated with (in order of size of the effect), social self-concept, academic self-concept, taking advanced courses, time spent on homework, postsecondary educational aspirations, GPA, parental involvement, absenteeism, senior-year educational aspirations, being in the academic track, college attendance, parental aspirations, and senior occupational aspirations. (Marsh, 1992, p. 557)

Though this study is 20 years old and focused on extra-curricular activities as a whole, the correlation is suggestive of at least some benefits of athletic participation related to academic and social self-concepts.

Social self-concept. There is also a limited amount of research which reveals the effects of athletic participation and how it affects social self-concept. Though few studies directly explore connections between social self-concept and athletic participation, several examine athletic participation and self-esteem, which is a foundational aspect of self-concept (Shavelson, et. al 1976; Marsh & Shavelson, 1985).

Fredricks and Eccles (2008) surveyed 1,482 middle and high school students and their families and found varied results regarding the benefits of high school athletics; however, there were a few notable findings that suggested athletics positively affected self-esteem:

Several major findings emerged from this study: . . . (e) involvement in 8th grade school sports predicted an increase in resiliency over time, and (f) involvement in 8th grade out of school recreation activities predicted a lower than expected decline in self-esteem 3 years later. (p. 1039)

Among the positive findings above is the maintenance of self-esteem during a period of adolescence in which loss of self-esteem is typical. Though Fredricks and Eccles (2008) saw a decrease in self-esteem in the general student population, they found increased resiliency; a determination within the athletic participant group. Over the course of the researchers' three year study, athletic participation may have lead participants to see themselves as having more belief in their abilities and thus a more developed self-concept.

Findlay and Bowker (2007) also found that athletic experiences may foster a higher self-esteem. In their study, 351 high school students who participated in athletics completed questionnaires describing their school athletic experiences, self-classifying themselves as “non-athlete, competitive, or elite.” All participants showed some level of increased self-esteem, though not all increases were statistically significant:

Athleticism . . . was found to significantly predict general self-esteem, global physical self-esteem, physical competence, and appearance self-concept, although the elite and competitive groups were not found to be significantly different except for physical competence self-concept. Thus participation at some competitive level is related to positive psychological well-being. (Findlay & Bowker, 2007, p. 37)

In essence, those who participated in athletics had a higher social self-concept although there was no statistically significant difference based on the level of sports involvement; all participants experienced some positive benefits.

Further in the study, Findlay and Bowker (2007) discussed the motivations participants had for becoming part of the athletic programs. They posited that sport orientation, the motivation for students to be part of athletics, and self-concept may be connected: “It would appear that the relation between self-concept and athleticism is partially dependent on the individual’s motivation for competing, for example being win-oriented versus goal-oriented” (Findlay & Bowker, 2007, p. 38). As the researchers acknowledge, individuals participate in athletics for a variety of reasons. The researchers here did not discover how these reasons may affect their overall athletic experience, but they did suggest that motivation to participate in sports may be a factor in developing self-concept.

Precursors of high school athletic participation and self-concept. Given the limited number of research studies focused on athletics in high school, I have included some pre-high school studies. These may be suggestive in understanding students’ later athletic experiences. In a recent longitudinal study regarding physical self-concept, Marsh, Gerlach, Trautwein, Ludtke, and Brettschneider (2007) asked 135 third, fourth, and sixth graders to complete surveys about their athletic experiences. They were testing if the participants’ belief in achieving athletic success changed positively or negatively as they aged. In essence, how did they feel about their athletic participation and how did they perceive the experience? They followed their sample population for three years, initially speculating that as the students grew through adolescence, self-concept would be slowed down or hampered. One of their key findings was that if athletic participants had adult leaders (coaches) who focused on improving both student self-concept and individual performance, participants experienced higher scores on an instrument called the Reciprocal Effects Model (REM), which measures some aspects of self-concept; however, if the

leaders of the activities focused solely on either individual performance or self-concept, the students were not as likely to demonstrate growth of self-concept (Marsh et al. 2007).

In another recent study, Slutzky and Simpkins (2009) looked at sport self-concept in relation to individual and team sports in 987 elementary participants. They “hypothesized that time spent in both team and individual sports would positively predict sport self-concept one year later” (Slutzky & Simpkins, 2009, p. 382). They found that those who played on teams (basketball, baseball, etc.) rather than participated in individual sport activities (golf, tennis, track and field, etc.) were more likely to have higher self-esteem:

. . . time spent in team sports was positively associated with sport self-concept, whereas time in individual sports and sport self-concept were not correlated . . . Together, these findings suggest that children who spent more time in team sports activities felt they were more competent in sports. In addition, children who felt they were more competent in sports were more likely to report high self-esteem than their peers. (Slutzky & Simpkins, 2009, p. 384)

For those participants that only participated in individual sports, they did not experience improved self-esteem in the way that team sports did. One of the limitations of the study was that the researchers focused on middle class European American communities and acknowledged that their sample data, from 1987, may have been outdated.

Self-concept studies have become more prevalent in a number of fields since Shavelson’s (1976) initial study. This dissertation is a qualitative study that will bring voice to actual athletic participants. As such, self-concept, how athletes see and understand themselves, will be explored. What also affects how athletes develop their self-concept is the interactions they have with those around them. Regardless of whether students participated in individual or team

sports, all of them had the constant of working with an adult, the coach. What follows in the next theme are studies that better define the role of coach and how such individuals impact those they supervise.

The Role of Coach

As the adult leaders of high school activities, coaches play an important role in the experiences of participants. Coaches have daily interactions with athletes and carry influence over athletic participants. They can create positive learning environments, influence behaviors, teach physical technique and tactics, and have interactions with parents that can be supportive or confrontational (Denham 2009; Shields, La Voi, Bredemeier, & Power, 2007; Lee, Ntoumanis, & Hatzigeorgiadis, 2009; Scantling & Lackey, 2005; Fejgin, 1994; Boyd & Hrycaiko, 1997; Fredricks & Eccles, 2010; Gould, Collins, Lauer & Chung; 2007; Eitzen & Sage, 2008). This study will give voice to the athletic participants and explain how they see their coaches and how they affected their experiences.

As Denham (2009) argues in his study, “Much like the interaction that occurs between teachers and students, coaches communicate with their athletes to foster a learning environment to help ensure positive learning outcomes” (p.73). Like academic teachers, coaches are charged with leading athletic programs with little if any prior contact with the participants. Furthermore, they face similar obstacles in trying to find the best ways to motivate their teams to achieve individual and team goals. What is clear is that their actions, positive and negative, influence those they supervise. The subthemes of influencing adult behaviors, the challenges coaches face in creating supportive environments, and coaches as teachers are what follows.

Influencing adult behaviors. One of the ways researchers have studied high school athletics is by examining the influence of coaches. Shields, LaVoi, Bredemeier, and Power

(2007) had 676 students from 5th through 8th grade complete questionnaires. Specifically, they wanted to know what the students learned about sportsmanship and how they learned it. They found that the coaches could positively influence participant behavior if they served as models.

Concurring with the cliché “actions speak louder than words,” the results from the present study suggest that it may be the coaches’ behavior, rather than their expressed attitude, that matters most to athletes. If the coach wants to have a positive influence, he or she may need to uphold high standards of professional and ethical behavior. (Shields et al., 2007, p. 757)

Coaches influence students and can teach appropriate adult behaviors if the coaches who work within the program serve as models. On the other hand, coaches who do not uphold high professional standards may also find athletes reflect lowered ethical behavior.

Coaches as models for athletes in learning appropriate behaviors also appears in the Lee, Ntoumanis, and Hatzigeorgiadis, (2008) study. They had 549 students age 12-15 complete the Youth Values Sports Questionnaire, which addresses morality within the athletic experience and what participants learned from high school athletics. They found that coaches and other adults associated with high school athletics influence how well young people will learn appropriate, i.e. “adult,” behaviors. They created a set of moral, competence, and status value statements they shared with athletic participants so that they could help the researchers discover how coaches influenced them. For example, a moral value statement in the study was “I try to be fair.” A competence value statement was “I set my own targets.” A status value statement was “I look good.”

If sport is to act as an agent of moral growth, coaches, teachers, and parents should promote moral and competence values rather than status values. This can be achieved by

positive modeling on the part of significant others and encouraging both the understanding of moral dilemmas in sport and the importance of making self-referenced evaluations of success. (Lee et al., 2008, p. 605)

Coaches can create environments which foster and reward ethical fitness when they model appropriate behaviors by exploring moral dilemmas with participants. If coaches stress moral growth over competence and status, they are more likely to impart morality to the young athlete.

The challenge of sustaining support. Whether coaches are employed at a school with support structures that allow them to experiment, develop, and succeed or face environments in which they find themselves isolated, fearful, and structurally restricted, they exist in a changing and, in some cases, hostile environment. The Scantling and Lackey (2005) 30 year longitudinal study had up to 292 principals in Nebraska identify the challenges high school coaches face within their schools. One of their main findings revealed a long-standing lack of job security. As coaching positions in most cases are seasonal positions without tenure or other job security, coaches face constant uncertainty about their own positions as well as that of their athletic programs. “As much as we would like to conclude otherwise, we find that coaches are at the mercy of others and, in most instances, unable to control their own destiny” (Scantling & Lackey, 2005, p. 28). Furthermore, the coaching applicant pool has changed over the past 30 years; no longer are all coaches PE teachers. They may, in fact, not have teaching responsibilities at all. California, in particular, requires coaching applicants merely to have completed a four hour online course, CPR and First Aid certification, a valid tuberculosis test, and a general background check to make sure applicants do not have criminal records. There is no education prerequisite, according to the National Association of State Boards of Education

(NASBE). Such an environment has created many opportunities for individuals to coach who may not be ready for the challenges they face.

That being the case, successful coaches have to be able to adapt quickly and become boundary spanners who have a strong sense of self-confidence and an ability to communicate with others. Coaches make decisions in which they believe they are improving the athletic programs and the school's participants, but they must be able to explain these decisions to the parents and school leaders who may not share their beliefs.

In some cases, coaches find themselves on metaphorical deserted islands in which they simply try to survive. Parents, administrators and sometimes even the athletes themselves can turn on a coach or not buy into their vision and this leaves many coaches feeling isolated. Some coaches develop autocratic coaching styles that can undermine the goals of creating positive athletic experiences: "Most coaches (high school) impose their will on their teams concerning team rules, discipline, play calling, and personnel decisions...A system that denies personal autonomy apparently fosters dependence and immaturity rather than the presumed virtues of participation, which are leadership, independence, and self-motivation" (Eitzen & Sage, 2008, p. 100). Thus, without proper guidance, coaches may sabotage the intent of athletics programs while empowering those who argue athletic programs disadvantage our youth psychologically and academically. It is imperative to learn what participants say about how their coach impacted them to help clarify the literature.

Feltz, Chase, Moritz, and Sullivan (1999) created the Coaching Efficacy Scale (CES) instrument by using a sample of 517 coaches. In their study, they address the importance of supporting those who coach. The CES includes the categories of teaching technique, motivation, and game strategy. They argued that, "Coaching experience and perceived social support,

especially from the community, parents, and athletic director, appear to be important sources in creating a sense of coaching efficacy in coaches” (p. 774). In other words, coaches were able to foster a more satisfactory environment for athletic participants when they felt supported either by parents or school personnel.

Parents play a key role in coaches seeing themselves as successful. When coaches are not supported by parents, students do not experience growth opportunities or positive environments that could be set in place: “No one is less objective in evaluating a coach’s performance than a parent. Yet it is the parent (evaluating the team through the eyes of his or her child) that plays a dominant role in coaching survival” (Scantling & Lackey, 2005, p. 28). Like the child who has to go to the principal’s office for misbehaving in an academic class, if the parent only listens to the report of the student, they may feel the teacher and school are setting the child up for failure; however, if the parent listens to the principal’s account of the incident and creates a nonjudgmental context for the parent, a mutual understanding can better all parties. Essentially, if the parents are unable to look objectively at the athletic program or develop a relationship with the coach outside of what they hear from their children, they may not get a full understanding of the impacts of the athletic program.

As stated earlier, coaches have daily interactions which influence students. This creates opportunities for coaches to play a role in students’ development. In the study by Lee and his associates (2008), they discuss ethical role modeling as coaches provide examples of how to behave. Athletes observe how their coaches deal with situations throughout their time together. Coaches that feel supported are more likely to emphasize reflection and ignite passion in themselves and their teams. (Fejgin, 1994; Boyd & Hrycaiko, 1997; Fredricks & Eccles, 2010).

Coaches as teachers. Athletic coaches were found to be one of the variables that helped develop cognitive development and build successful life skills in athletic participants. When coaches support participants, they give them the opportunity to succeed. Gould, Collins, Lauer, and Chung (2007) interviewed 10 high school football coaches who were finalists for the NFL High School Coach of the Year to determine if and how they developed life skills in participants. They found that, “A key to developing both life and performance skills [in young athletes] for these coaches was the ability to [gain trust and] build relationships with their players. They did this through their strong communication skills and by treating their athletes as young adults” (Gould et al., 2007, p. 29). This dissertation will give voice to athletic participants and shed light on the interactions participants had with the adults who lead their activities.

Coaches also play a role in developing young people’s perspective in how to deal with challenge. Participating in athletics gives students the opportunity to develop relationships with teammates and their coaches; however, such lessons are not without controversy. Many parents and community members judge coaching performance on the ability to win contests (Eitzen and Sage, 2008, p. 100). Success in high school athletics rarely focuses on helping others or developing relationships with teammates. Such an emphasis causes participants to feel unnecessary psychological pressure and validate winning as the only meaningful goal in athletics. If sports are no longer fun and the stress of winning outweighs the enjoyment of participating in the sport, participants experience the athletic program as an environment that fosters resentment rather than an environment that fosters growth (Eitzen and Sage, 2008, p. 101).

Summary

Investigating the high school athletic participant experience is one of the purposes of this study. The research questions focus on student athletes describing their experience and discovering how these experiences still affect them in their current lives. Such an examination can deepen and enhance the meaning of current literature in the field. Consequently, the findings of this study will lay the foundations for future research and cover areas previously unexplored.

High school athletic programs have evolved since their early days of the 1900's (Wingate, 1908; Rader, 2009; Coakley & Pike, 2009). Researchers have studied a number of ways athletics seems to affect participants from benefits ranging from academic success, socialization, better health, increased leadership capacity, and decreasing anxiety. (Hartman, Sullivan & Nelson, 2012; Eide & Ronan, 2001; Fredricks & Eccles, 2008; Dodge & Lambert, 2008, Dobosz & Beaty, 1999; Dimech & Seiler, 2011). There have also been studies that reveal the drawbacks of participation including the possibility of lower moral standards, substance abuse, and engaging in risk behaviors (Hagenbaugh, 2010; Wilson, Pritchard, & Schaeffer, 2004; Taylor & Turek, 2010). It is imperative to gain the perspective of actual participants and this dissertation will help clarify and add to the findings of the current literature.

To create a better understanding of how high school athletics may affect participants, additional literature was reviewed to explain the history and current research of self-concept theory as it may apply to the understanding of the athletic experience (Marsh & Shavelson, 1985; Shavelson, 1976; Byrne, 2002; Fejgin, 1994; Marsh, 1992; Fredricks & Eccles, 2008; Findlay & Bowker, 2007). Understanding self-concept theory and how it affects individuals will create a clearer picture of what effect athletics has in helping shape the identities of participants. This

dissertation will give voice to participants so they can help clarify how their athletic experiences affected them.

Literature was also reviewed about the role coaches play in high school athletics as these individuals deal with participants on a daily basis and stand as models, both positive and negative (Denham, 2007; Ntoumanis & Hatzigeorgiadis, 2008; Scantling & Lackey, 2005; Feltz, Chase, Moritz, & Sullivan, 1999; Gould, Collins, Lauer, & Chung, 2007). This dissertation will help clarify researchers findings as well as bring voice to participants who can better identify how coaches affect them during and after their high school participation.

Chapter 3 addresses the research methods of this study in which 15 student alumni in three suburban high schools described their high school athletics experiences.

Chapter 3

Design of the Study

This is an exploratory, descriptive study. The research questions explore: How do students describe their high school athletic experience and how do these experiences still affect them today in their daily lives? Studying what participants say will not only give voice to the student athletes, but may also give direction on how to design more effective high school athletic environments. In addition, such research may better inform parents, community, and educational leaders about how athletic programs impact youth.

Numerous quantitative studies on outcomes of athletic participation have focused on measurements of academic success, self-esteem, and low dropout rates (Whisenant, Pederson, & Clavio, 2010; Dodge & Lambert, 2008; Findlay & Bowker, 2007; Lawson, 2005). However, for nearly 40 years there has been a call for additional qualitative study (Whitson, 1976; Bain, 1995; Kerry & Armour, 2000; Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). In Hartman, Sullivan and Nelson's (2012) recent study, they sum up the desire of current and past researchers:

Further work should aim to articulate the contextual complexities (when, where, and for whom) of social attitudes and opinions as they exist among different kinds of athletes and explore the role of sports participation in the presence of certain attitudes and opinions among athletes. (p.129)

I interviewed former high school athletes about their perceptions of their high school athletics experience. This may lead to a deeper understanding of the role of high school athletics in students' lives during and after their athletic participation and contribute much needed qualitative research to the field.

In this chapter, I describe the research design, epistemological assumptions, and methods to be used in this study. A description of the sample follows as well as how data was collected. I describe my data analysis procedures with special attention to the trustworthiness and transferability of the study. Finally, I conclude with a summary of the main elements of the chapter and transition to the findings described in Chapter 4.

Epistemological assumptions and research design

Given the study's emphasis on perception and interpretation, a post-positivist paradigm seemed most appropriate. This led to a qualitative epistemology, one "that promotes there is no absolute truth because it is contingent on context and multiple perspectives" (Saldana, 2011, p. 23). I wanted to construct meaning from what the participants said about their experience. This qualitative, constructivist approach enabled me to describe how the athletes themselves understand the relevance of athletic programs in their lives and possibly the lives of other student athletes.

The primary data source for this descriptive, interpretative study came from interviews with former high school athletes. I conducted individual semi-structured interviews over a period of two months. The interviews were audio-taped and lasted between twenty to forty five minutes. After each interview, I took immediate notes, memoing anything that stood out to me as potential items of importance (Saldana, 2009).

Upon transcription of the interviews, I reviewed the data, coded, and developed categories. I also conducted member checks, having the participants read over the transcription for accuracy to see if they wanted to add or clarify any points that arose during their review of the transcription (Saldana, 2011). Finally, I constructed themes.

In my initial attempt to find themes, I could not separate my subjectivity from the study and ended up with skewed data. After a consultation with my committee and under close supervision from my chair, I revisited the coding process and was able to find and report themes that emerged from the data provided by the participants.

Sample selection

This study focused on 15 high school alumni, 7 girls and 8 boys, who attended high school in the (pseudonymous) Hillside Union High School District in the Western United States. The district, chosen for the sake of convenience, has three schools, Inspiration High School, Diamond High School, and Hillside High School. The participants took part in a variety of both individual and team high school sports, such as basketball, football, softball, tennis, track and field, and swimming. Some were multiple sport athletes.

The purposeful sample (Saldana, 2011) was drawn from students who participated in varsity level athletics for at least two years while they attended high school. Because varsity level athletes are considered to be more accomplished, I felt their athletic experiences were more likely to have been more intense, thus possibly making them a more data-rich sample. Participants graduated from high school between two to five years prior to being interviewed.

Being an active athletic director by profession, I was able to use convenience sampling to select the participants of the study. By using school records and working with the school district data technicians, I contacted the parents of the alumni to gather recent contact information for the potential participants of the study. The school sites did not keep alumni databases, but the schools did have pre-graduation surveys which ask for permission for site staff to contact them in the future for research purposes. I located the participants through both site surveys and their last known school registration address to pursue participant permission to be a part of the study.

Through email and phone conversations I asked the potential participants of their interest in the study and, if they agreed to be part of the research. I had them sign consent forms prior to the beginning of the study.

In addition, even though the participants had graduated and were over the age of consent, I notified the local high school board of the study. I felt the district should know what I planned to do in terms of interviewing participants about programs that continue to run in the district. To preserve students' anonymity, I used pseudonyms for both participants and schools, and I described the geographic regions generically. What follows are brief backgrounds of the participants.

Anna. Anna is a white female student who attended Diamond High School for four years and is currently a student at an in-state public four year college where she has been studying music for the past two years. She does not participate in collegiate athletics. Prior to high school, she had some exposure to organized sports such as soccer, but she never had any formal training in tennis, her high school sport. While in high school, she played only tennis; however, she did play for all four years. In her freshmen year of high school she participated in junior varsity tennis before moving to the varsity team in her sophomore year. In her senior season, she was selected by her coach to be the team captain. Being a captain for her was important as she saw herself in a position that required her to take more responsibility for the work ethic of the team as she was expected to keep the team efforts high and serve as a liaison to the coach and team. During her junior year, she experienced a change of coaches as her previous coach relocated to a different state.

Beatrice. Beatrice is a white female student who attended Inspiration High School for four years and is currently a student at an out-of-state public four year college as a softball

scholarship athlete studying business. Prior to high school, she participated in organized junior high softball as well as traveling club softball. While in high school she played two sports: volleyball and softball. After her second year, she stopped playing volleyball as she felt it was in her best interest to focus her attention on her primary sport of softball. In volleyball, she only participated at the junior varsity level.

In her first year of high school, she made the varsity softball team and played for the school all four years. She also played on a club softball team before and after the high school seasons. She had the same softball coach for all four years of her participation and was named a captain for her last year of participation.

Cathy. Cathy is a white female student who attended Inspiration High School for four years and is currently a senior at an in-state public four year college as a scholarship softball athlete studying journalism. Prior to high school, she participated in organized junior high softball and traveling club softball. While in high school she played three sports: volleyball, basketball, and softball. She played volleyball in the first two years at the junior varsity level. She played basketball all four years and was on the varsity team beginning her second year. She played varsity softball all four years. She stopped playing volleyball as she felt she did not make a connection with the coach and did not feel passionate about the sport.

In basketball, she played for three different coaches; one at the junior varsity level her freshman year, one varsity coach for two years, and in her senior season a new coach as the previous coach was removed from his position for reasons unexplored by this study. Her basketball coach she played for in her second and third year of participation served also as her softball coach all four years. She was named captain of the team in her final year and was named by the school, “athlete of the year” after her season completed.

Diedre. Diedre is a white female student who attended Hillside High School for four years and is currently a junior at an out-of-state public four year college studying Nursing. She does not participate in collegiate athletics. Prior to high school, she participated in club soccer and junior high school basketball. In high school she participated in three sports: cross country running, basketball, and track. In cross country, she was a varsity participant for all four years with the same coach. In basketball, she was a varsity participant for the last two years of high school and was on the junior varsity team in her first two years. She was a varsity track athlete for two years but decided against participation in her junior and senior years as she did not enjoy it as much as cross country practices. Cross Country was her primary sport and she had the same coach for all four years of participation.

Emma. Emma is a white female student who attended Inspiration High School for four years and is currently a junior in an in-state public four year college currently studying Biology. She does not participate in collegiate athletics. Prior to high school, she participated in club soccer, travel club volleyball, and travel club basketball as well as junior high volleyball and basketball. In high school she participated in basketball and volleyball for three years. In volleyball, she played junior varsity for her first two years before moving up to the varsity squad her third year. In basketball, she was a three year varsity athlete, participating in her first three years. The school made a coaching change in basketball between her sophomore and junior year so she had two varsity coaches during her years of participation. She decided to not participate in athletics her final year of high school to focus on academics and to save money for college by getting a part-time job. Basketball was her primary sport; however, she did state that she never developed a positive relationship with her last varsity basketball coach.

Gina. Gina is a white female student who attended Inspiration High School for four years and is currently a junior at an in-state public four year college studying Chemistry. She does not participate in collegiate athletics. Prior to high school, she participated in club swimming. In high school she participated in two sports: water polo and swimming. In both sports, she was a varsity participant for all four years. In between her third and fourth year the school had a coaching change in water polo. In swimming, she worked with the same coach for all four years. She was named a team captain on both squads by her third year and was named valedictorian by the school before she graduated.

Haley. Haley is a white female student who attended Inspiration High School for four years and is currently a senior at an in-state public four year college studying Biology. She is part of the collegiate water polo team. Prior to high school, she participated in club soccer and junior high school volleyball. In high school, she participated in three sports: volleyball, water polo, and swimming. She played volleyball at the freshmen level during her first year before deciding to try another sport, water polo. She played water polo at the varsity level for the remainder of her three years at high school. In swimming, she participated at the varsity level all four years. In between her second and third year the school had a coaching change so she was able to experience two different coaches in her high school career.

Ignacio. Ignacio is Latino student who attended Inspiration High School for four years and is currently a senior at an in-state private four year college studying Kinesiology. He participates in collegiate athletics as a member of the football team with a partial athletic scholarship. Prior to high school, he played club football and junior high school basketball. In high school he participated in three sports: football, basketball, and baseball. He played junior varsity football during his first year of high school and varsity football during his last three years.

He was also named captain of the football team during his third and fourth year of high school. In basketball, he played junior varsity basketball for his first two years and varsity basketball for his final two years. He played baseball during his final year of high school at the varsity level. Before graduating high school, he was named the school athlete of the year.

Jeremy. Jeremy is a white male student who attended Diamond High School for four years and is currently a junior attending an in-state public four year school studying Business. He does not participate in collegiate athletics. Prior to high school, he played club soccer and club baseball. In high school he only participated in tennis. In his first year of high school he tried out for baseball and did not make the team. He immediately tried out for tennis, made the junior varsity team in his first year and played varsity his second through fourth years.

Keith. Keith is a black male student who attended Inspiration High School for four years and is currently a junior attending an in-state public four year school studying Business. He participates in collegiate athletics as a football player with a full athletic scholarship. Prior to high school, he played junior high basketball and club football. In high school, he participated in basketball and football. He participated in junior varsity football and basketball his first year and was moved to the varsity teams in his second through fourth years.

Lance. Lance is a white male student who attended Inspiration High School for four years and is currently a senior attending an in-state private four year college studying Economics. He participates in collegiate athletics on the water polo team. Prior to high school, he played junior high school basketball and was a part of club swimming. In high school, he participated in water polo, swimming, basketball, and volleyball. He was a four year varsity player in water polo. He also has the unique perspective of having played for his father, who was the head water polo coach.

In basketball, he played his first year at the freshmen level and his second year at the junior varsity level. He decided after his second season that he no longer wanted to continue with basketball.

He was a varsity swimmer for his first three years of high school. Although he described himself as a successful swimmer, he decided to try something new during his final year and played varsity volleyball. Before graduation, he was named school athlete of the year.

Mark. Mark is a white male student who attended Inspiration High School for four years and is currently a junior at an in-state four year college studying Business. He participates in collegiate sports as a scholarship baseball player. Prior to high school, Mark participated in club baseball. In high school, he was a one sport athlete participating in baseball and made the varsity team during his first year. In his first year, he played an integral role in the high school team's success as a he was a pitcher.

Nick. Nick is a white male student who attended Inspiration High School for four years and is currently a junior at an out-of-state four year college studying Kinesiology. He participates in collegiate sports as a scholarship football player. Prior to high school, Nick participated in club football. In high school, he was a one sport athlete participating in football all four years. After playing junior varsity football for his first two years, he played varsity football.

Peter. Peter is a white male student who attended Inspiration High School for four years and is currently a senior at an in-state four year college studying Science. He does not participate in collegiate athletics. Prior to high school, he participated in club soccer. In high school, he was a two sport athlete participating in water polo and wrestling. In both sports he became part of the varsity team in his third year, playing on JV teams in the first two years.

Sam. Sam is a white male who attended Inspiration High School for four years and is currently employed as a welder. He attended an out-of-state junior college directly after high school graduation, but did not find college to fit his needs. He moved back to his home state, enrolled and finished a one year apprenticeship with the welder's union and currently works. This is currently his fourth year out of high school. Prior to high school, he participated in club wrestling. In high school, he was a one sport athlete as a wrestler. He made the varsity wrestling team all four years of his high school career and was regarded as one of the top 10 wrestlers in his weight class due to his results at the end of the year state tournaments. At the end of his high school career he was named school athlete of the year.

Setting

Hillside Union High School district encompasses three suburban schools in a working class, affluent, commuter community on the outskirts of a major metropolitan city in the western states. Most residents do not work in the suburban community and must commute between 30 and 150 minutes to and from work. The community has felt the impact of the economic crunch of the late 2000's and some students have had to deal with parents trying to cope with unemployment and housing foreclosures.

All three high schools in the Hillside district were designed for 1800 students each. Hillside opened over a century ago during an economic boom. Inspiration High did not open until 1996 while Diamond High School opened in 2005. All three schools see continued student growth past their initial capacity of approximately 1800 per site. Currently, each school has approximately 2400 students per site. The district's ethnicity in the schools is 48% White, 33% Latino, 9% African American, and 10% Asian. Students who qualify for the free lunch program, considered an estimate of poverty level, stand at 17% and 8% are English language learners.

The schools have athletic programs partially funded by the school district. Additional funds come from gate receipts of football and basketball games, donations, and booster groups. The schools have a variety of athletic facilities that are not always equal. For example, Hillside is the oldest school and has two gymnasiums on campus while Inspiration has more grass athletic fields and Diamond has the largest pool and gym facility. Despite these noticeable differences, all three school communities have embraced their athletic programs and the district personnel work to find ways to make the schools as equitable as possible in both academics and athletics.

The schools offer 20 varsity sports at each site, seven in the fall season, six in the winter, and seven in the spring. Over half of the coaches are teachers on campus while the rest are community members. Although the National Association of School Boards of Education recognizes no prescribed education requirements for coaches, all coaches in the state of the study, regardless of whether they teach academic courses on campus or are community members, must complete a state certified online class through the National Federation of High Schools (NFHS).

Data Collection

I followed research methods as described by Saldana (2009). I conducted 15 semi-structured interviews of approximately 20 to 45 minutes. The 12 questions used in the interview can be found in Appendix A. Since the participants were attending schools or employed around the state and country, I used the then newly-available GoogleVoice telephone technology to hold all the interviews. The technology allows the user to get a digital recording of phone calls to with instantaneous uploads to the GoogleDrive in a .mpeg format. This allows for immediate review, segmentation, or disbursement to transcription companies.

Before the actual study began, I conducted three pilot interviews that ran for approximately an hour. Although the three pilot interviews went off without fail, the actual participant recordings had delays. In the middle of interviews I found I would ask questions and hear long silences before responses. At first, I thought the participants were taking their time in reflecting on how to answer the questions; however, the pauses turned out to be a function of technological delays. Participants thought I was delaying questions as if I were taking notes and uncomfortable silences emerged during the interview process. These may have affected how the thoroughly participants responded to the questions. After the pilots, I expected the same length in the study; however, some of the participants were not as responsive. I memoed after each interview, writing down immediate reflections and highlighting anything I felt was of particular importance.

For the next step of analysis, I used the GMR transcription service to transcribe the files. With the GoogleVoice files, they were able to get the transcripts back to me within three days. The interviews were then analyzed. To increase the accuracy of the study, I also had the participants take part in a “member check” showing the participants the transcriptions so they could elaborate or correct any areas they felt were unclear. In all cases, they were satisfied with the transcriptions and made no changes. As a final step, I reviewed my transcriptions with my chair to see if I had followed correct empirical research methods.

Data Analysis

Upon completion of the transcriptions, I analyzed the data using the constant comparative method to develop codes and categories while maintaining an audit trail (Saldana, 2009, 2011). After the transcriptions, codes, and memos were checked, I began work on categorizing. It was during this step that I realized my codes were skewed. My initial codes reflected my subjectivity

working in the athletic field. After consultation with committee, I reanalyzed the data. Emergent themes were developed that more accurately reflected the participants' experiences.

Trustworthiness and Transferability

Throughout the data analysis process, reflections and notes for the purposes of an “audit trail” were maintained, enhancing the trustworthiness of the findings and the transferability of conclusions and recommendations. I shared my work with my dissertation committee so I could stay true to the study and work to minimize any researcher bias that could skew results as well.

Summary

This chapter reviewed the descriptive, exploratory study with fifteen high school athletic alumni. The two driving research questions were to discover how athletes describe their high school athletic experience and to discover how these experiences still affect them in their current lives. The selection of the participants along with their general backgrounds were presented along with the setting. There was also a section devoted to the data collection experience and the challenges presented by using the GoogleVoice technology. If we are to better understand the athletic experience, we must also understand and listen to the voices of athletic participants to discover how athletics affects them. This dissertation study will give voice to the participants and further clarify the athletic experience. The findings are presented in the next chapter.

Chapter 4

Results

This chapter presents the results of the descriptive study. The research questions explore: How do students describe their high school athletic experiences and how do these experiences affect them in their current daily lives? Studying what participants say will add to a growing body of empirical research focusing on high school athletic participants. Such a study may give direction to more effective design of high school athletic environments to better support athletes' growth. In addition, such research may better inform parents, community, and educational leaders about how athletic programs impact adolescent youth.

In this chapter I will briefly review the data collection and reduction methods before introducing the themes that arose from data analysis. In addition, there will be a short section addressing the trustworthiness of the study.

Data Collection

Fifteen participants were selected for the study. As an athletic director, I had prior knowledge of several potential participants. Others were invited following fellow coaches' recommendations. The criteria for the purposeful sample (Saldana, 2011) were that the students had graduated from high school between two and four years prior to their interview and had participated in a variety of sports. All participants were interviewed in 15-45 minute interviews by phone using the Google Voice program and then transcribed. Table 1 identifies the participants with their basic information.

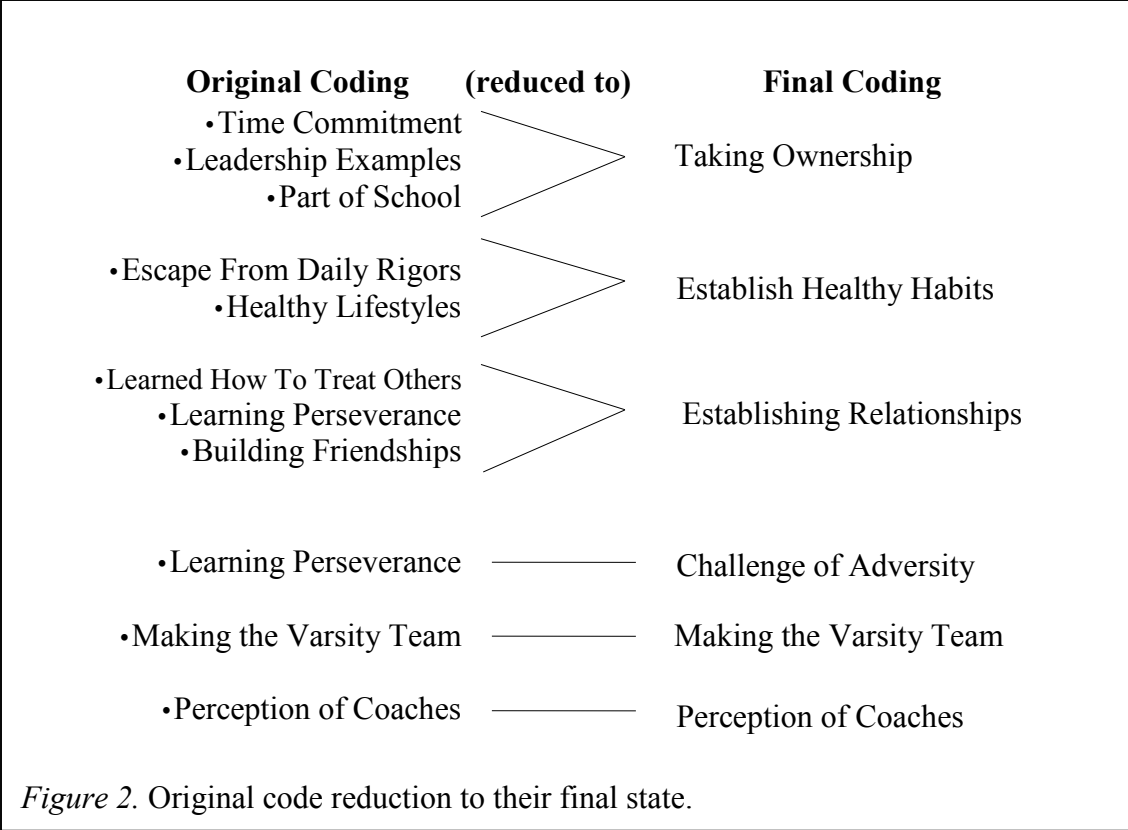
Table 1

Basic Participant Information

Participant	Age	College	Collegiate Athlete	Gender	Interview Time
Anna	21	Yes	No	Female	18 min.
Beatrice	20	Yes	Yes	Female	36 min.
Cathy	20	Yes	Yes	Female	21 min.
Diedre	20	Yes	No	Female	24 min.
Emma	20	Yes	No	Female	16 min.
Gina	20	Yes	No	Female	27 min.
Haley	21	Yes	Yes	Female	21 min.
Ignacio	21	Yes	Yes	Male	23 min.
Jeremy	20	Yes	No	Male	18 min.
Keith	20	Yes	Yes	Male	25 min.
Lance	21	Yes	Yes	Male	40 min.
Mark	20	Yes	Yes	Male	15 min.
Nick	20	Yes	Yes	Male	20 min.
Peter	21	Yes	No	Male	26 min.
Sam	21	No	No	Male	33 min.

Data Reduction

I used Saldana’s (2009) thematic interpretation approach to data analysis. After completing each interview, I immediately made note of my initial reactions. Upon the receipt of the transcriptions, I read them and began the process of coding. My initial coding approaches proved too prescriptive, so a subsequent attempt involved reexamining all the transcripts with greater attention to the participants’ language. I then worked on a matrix to codify possible categories. The revised codes (from the second coding session) and the categories that emerged are shown in Figure 2.



These six themes and their subheadings described perceived benefits and drawbacks of participation in high school athletics as experienced by the participants.

Theme 1 – Taking ownership

Taking ownership is defined as accepting responsibility and feeling accountable for individual and team outcomes. This involved exercising leadership, effective teamwork, and self-discipline. Ten of the participants described taking ownership as a benefit gained from athletic participation.

Exercising leadership. Exercising leadership is defined in this study as taking initiative, recognizing that others may need help or assistance, and mobilizing others to perform better in order to create more positive outcomes. Athletic participation fostered these capacities.

Georgia recognized the need to boost morale in order to maintain positive attitudes in her teammates. Athletic competition was filled with many situations in which negative emotions

gripped both players and coaches. In one instance, she felt the coaches had “given up” on the team. Her teammates “had never been in that situation before where coaches yell at you or are disappointed.” She realized that the coaches’ approach was not beneficial to herself or her teammates. She “stepped in” to counter their negative communication:

[I realized] you just have to keep encouraging. I had to keep their morale up a little bit and show the younger girls that you lose sometimes and people get mad, but after that happens you have to keep going, and this was at a tournament.

And then the next game we played, the whole time we just had to keep reminding the girls the little things they had to work on to make sure that they didn’t get too upset about it or down about it and just keep playing the game and being happy about it.

She knew her coaches were frustrated with the team’s level of play, but also knew that yelling from coaches was not going to produce positive team results: higher morale leads to better outcomes. Her actions on behalf of herself and the team demonstrated her capacity to know what to do and then take the initiative to do it, both in the initial encounter and throughout the ensuing tournament games.

Haley also recognized the value of encouragement. Not only did she identify the importance of maintaining high morale in her teammates, but demonstrated that she could do so in difficult and demanding circumstances:

Personally when you’re in a game and you’re down, or your team’s down, and you really have to dig deep and find encouragement in yourself. And you have to reach out to your teammates and help encourage them. And you have to be there not only for yourself but you have to bring everyone [together] as a team.

In each of the situations above, the participants recognized the need to act effectively on the part of their teammates, even beyond their accustomed roles, and thus to improve team unity and possibly find better contest outcomes.

Ignacio found himself acting as a leader when he realized he had to call his teammates to action. He was “embarrassed because I knew we were a much better team than we were showing.” Before this moment, he had led by example; in this instance he pushed himself to become more outspoken:

It seemed like we were playing . . . like the game was over. During that half-time I just got in front of the team and – pretty uncharacteristic at the time and I would still say so now – I just yelled and pleaded like, “This is not what we came here for.” It was the first time I had ever had to lead in a vocal way, instead of just show[ing] them. “This is unacceptable. This kind of effort isn’t acceptable.” . . . I had felt that I had to push myself out of my comfort zone and assert myself as a leader.

His commitment and sense of responsibility for the team enabled him to act more forcefully and assertively than he had realized was possible for him. He describes himself as an individual who does not normally engage in such vocal actions, in a word, shy. He even says he is still shy today. Nevertheless, being part of his team and being inside a competitive, yet supportive environment, brought forth a side of leadership that he had not previously engaged. Athletics fostered these capacities he had not realized he had within him.

Another aspect of exercising leadership emerged from an instance of compassion off the field. Haley earlier described going through athletic experiences that made her “dig deep and find encouragement in yourself . . . [You need] to reach out to your teammates and help encourage them . . . to bring everyone [together] as a team.” During one of her seasons, she also

encountered a teammate who had gone through personal tragedy. Haley described how her bond with her teammate transcended the usual concerns about the outcomes of athletic contests:

My teammate[’s] . . . house burned down and so she couldn’t go home. She was stuck up here [because] she still had to go to school . . . The first people she came to was us, was her team . . . [and even though we weren’t all that close outside of practice] we were there for her and helped her get through it. And she said it made it a lot easier for her to come to practice because we helped her get her mind off of that and helped her get through it. . . . You learn how to care about someone [through sports] because even though she’s just a teammate . . . your friendships grow and you do care about that person outside of that sport.

The relationships built through athletics transcend practice and game time. In essence, Haley reveals capacity for leadership by showing compassion. She helps her teammate in her time of need.

Effective teamwork. Being part of an athletic program unites participants and their teams. Effective teamwork results when teams learn how to work with others towards common goals. It encourages participants to adapt to various circumstances presented by both teammates and coaches. Sometimes it involves letting individual goals take a backseat to team improvement, school pride, and desired victory over opponents.

Being able to see the team as more important than individual desires is challenging. Emma touched on her realization of the importance of establishing unity within a team and becoming a “team player”:

A team player is someone who can easily play with others and get along with others and not just be selfish when playing the sport and being, like – I don’t know – like, you’re

easy to get along with, and you're able to share. [Even] the things that you're not good with, you can share with others. [That way you] all make each other better and grow all together, as a team, instead of just by yourself.

Although she does not use the term "bond," she describes a kind of connection that allows people to be accepted as they are, even when they reveal weaknesses.

Peter added to Emma's description while emphasizing that teams are often made up of people who come from divergent backgrounds:

You learn how to work with people who might be different than you. I guess it's more of interacting with other individuals of my age and figuring out a way that we could all work together to make our team better and make our school better.

Here he echoes Emma's concern for mutual acceptance and improvement.

Sam also highlighted this when he spoke of "teamwork, working with other people . . . the social aspects of working with other people, working for a common goal, friendly competition." He describes the constant demands of teamwork that focuses on achieving positive outcomes:

I guess you learn to bond with your whole entire team for usually three months at a time.

You learn how to work with people who might be different than you. I guess it's more of interacting with other individuals of my age and figuring out a way that we could all work together to make our team better and make our school look better.

He does not identify the makeup of the team or how his teammates differ from him, but he does recognize the importance of putting differences aside to work with others toward everyone's accomplishment and improvement.

Nevertheless, putting aside individual desires for the team presents challenges. Diedre expanded upon this by acknowledging that there are times when the actions of team members can affect one another adversely. She observes:

You learn what it's like to work on a team and know that there's gonna be times when someone else is gonna do something and it's gonna affect you, but you still have to work through it and do your part, and you can't really hold grudges against them because you're still a team.

She points to how essential it is to develop the capacity to look past her teammates' actions that may cause her to be uncomfortable in order to place the team's needs first.

These participants learned how to work with others and even subordinate their individual goals to the team. While working towards team improvement, they built bonds that allowed them to help each other and, at the very least, find ways to work together productively.

Effective teamwork also involved "hav[ing] to solve problems in an instant or adapt to different circumstances." During one athletic season during which Lance was injured, he found himself trying to find ways to stay meaningfully involved with the water polo team. "You have to learn to watch your teammates [doing stuff] without you, and you have to be not in the game, and you have to adapt to still be a teammate and a part of that team."

He found he could establish a new role, one he identified as being "an outside player."

You have to be a team motivator to motivate your players while they're playing and while you're on the sidelines . . . you have to just be a teammate differently than you [when] were in the pool with your teammates . . . I think an injury is a horrible thing to happen to an athlete, but it also gives the athlete adaptability to motivate themselves without being in the [activity], but still being on the team.

Unexpected events, like the one above, offer athletes opportunities to learn how to be effective teammates even in the face of adversity. In this case, Lance has to find a way to be meaningful to the team without physical contribution.

Keith found it challenging to learn to be patient with people. As he became more aware of the situations his teammates faced, athletic participation required him to confront his tendencies and adapt a more respectful, appreciative stance:

I learned how to deal with other people's personalities . . . Before I started playing sports I was a hot head and really had no patience for people that [I thought] were lazy. But going through sports [I saw] the individual struggles that people had to go through, [and that] they were committed to come out here and practice [anyway] . . . [That] made me look at people with a different perspective and [I became] more patient with people.

The demands of athletics, especially team sports, to work together effectively can help students question their assumptions and judgments about others.

Self-discipline. To participate in high school athletics participants had to set and meet both scheduling and academic requirements. Some teams had, “practices, like, every day except Sunday.” Self-discipline is therefore defined as devoting enough time and energy to balance academic, athletic, and social commitments.

Athletics are voluntary, extracurricular activities. Being the case, students faced a variety of challenges to balance their individual and team responsibilities. Sam highlighted the challenges aside from athletic participation:

You need to get your studies done. You can't be doing not well in your classes [and stay on the team]. You need to still be able to have time to get your homework done [and]

study for your class. [T]hat way you can succeed in graduating high school and hopefully moving on to bigger and better things.

At the same time, however, Diedre found that athletic participation, “teaches you a lot of responsibility because you have to manage your [own] time and you learn what it’s like to work.” She observed:

Sports take a lot of time and you’re still responsible for whatever school work you have to do; you’re still responsible for your home life and trying to balance having friends too. And for stuff like cross country you build up your responsibility because if you don’t run on the weekends or run on your own when your coach asks you to, it will show in your performance.

Here, Diedre adds the requirement for social balance on top of the demands of academics. She also points out that even when teams are not practicing together and no one is directly observing them, many young athletes must develop a sense of self-discipline about additional, individual practice.

Participants also faced challenges of finding time not only to complete academic homework, but also in catching up on regular school day work that was missed due to athletic contests. Anna talked about how this need for self-discipline affected her:

[It was difficult] having to leave classes early. I was in high school, I was in tennis all four years and softball two of the years and I would have to be, for away games, leaving class early and missing the material in class. And it[‘s] just kind of being stressful to catch up with the material and make sure you’re on the same level as the rest of the class.

These student-athletes faced multiple challenges that required a high level of self-discipline in terms of not only their sports performance, but also their schoolwork and even social activities.

Furthermore, having to leave classes early forced them to manage their workload in a way that compensated for lost class time.

The athletes in this study found taking ownership to be a benefit of their athletic participation. They found they took ownership by exercising self-discipline, exercising leadership, and learning how to work effectively in teams.

Theme 2 - Practice and establish healthy habits

Another positive outcome participants highlighted as part of their athletic experience was practicing and establishing healthy habits. These healthy habits are defined as regular exercise which decrease stress and promote overall body wellness or improvement of physical health. Athletic participation helped participants establish routines of exercise and health that still affect them today. Fourteen of the participants reported they benefited from athletic participation as they established healthy habits that many still practice today.

Stress management. Participants felt they were better able to manage and escape stress through athletics. Lance pointed out how high school students need to find ways to take breaks due to academic rigors. He talked about how “you need to keep your GPA high, your educational status quo above others.” When students are academically competitive, they face stress and seek release, “you also need, for lack of a better word, a break from schooling, and you need to participate in something.”

Athletic participation became a positive escape from daily life; an activity that allowed participants to feel better about themselves. Mark made global comments regarding athletics and the escape it provides, “High school athletics is an outlet for students to kind of take off their frustration or just to kind of get away from their life of craziness. . . when you’re out on the field

or on the court, that's kind of . . . your escape.” Athletics gave an opportunity for participants to break the routines of their daily lives.

Jeremy elaborated on the benefits of athletic activity. Sometimes, he took academic breaks with athletics. This time away from studies allowed him to refocus once he returned to complete his work:

When I was in my room studying and I wanted to go out and practice or anything, I would do that. I would be like, “all right, enough studying for right now, I want to go play tennis. I want to go outside and play baseball,” do *something*. But then I always came back to studying [and got] it done.

Beatrice, Haley, and Georgia emphasized how they looked forward to athletic participation at the end of the school day. For Beatrice, her practice time gave her a break from academic stress, “It was awesome being able to go from a stressful day at school and then onto the field where I didn't have to worry about anything.” Haley reported, “It's helped me remain focused and determined to finish college. And it's also been a big stress reliever.”

Georgia talked about her beneficial sense of well-being after practices and games. “After a really good game or after a really good practice, you feel really good afterwards. It's kind of just a good way to learn things and it's a de-stressor. And I think athletics is just a good thing because it brings a lot of people together. . .” She went on to tout other benefits; however, stress reduction was a key component of her athletic participation:

If I don't work out, I just get all anxious and everything because I am so used to it and it's such a good way to take a break and regroup yourself . . . And so it's definitely become a part of my life, even after I graduated.

These periods of heightened stress levels encouraged her to develop lifelong habits. Not only did she feel uncomfortable during the season if she did not partake in athletics, she found that she appreciated physical exercise in her current daily activities.

Anna acknowledged that though she found athletics to be a major stress reducer, she also recognized students who are unable to deal with the time demands might have divergent views:

Athletics might be like too stressful for some students . . . those that have trouble academically might find it difficult to balance after school sports and their time that they have studying for their classes. But for me it was definitely the best thing. It was a balance to my life.

Although athletics does increase individual responsibility, participants learn coping skills that can bring balance. She also noted that if students could manage to do so, “students with anxiety should pursue athletics as [it is] actually helpful.”

Healthy lifestyle. Physical activity is self-evidently part of every athletic program. However, in addition to being active and remaining fit during their high school athletic careers, participants reported having established ongoing patterns of commitment to healthy activity. Daily practices made them more aware of their health and they found they still partake in physical activities in their lives both individually and, in some cases, through collegiate athletic programs. Sam reported, “You’re going to the gym just to stay healthy. You’re eating healthier. You’re eating right. You’re living a better lifestyle for it.” Diedre echoed this sentiment when she said, “People who play sports have a certain lifestyle for the most part. They like to be healthy and do healthy things.”

Keith, a two sport athlete, described how he “always managed to stay in shape and stay physically fit so I was always playing both football and basketball . . . there was never a drop off in time when I was never doing anything.”

When asked if athletics had an impact on him since leaving high school, Jeremy highlighted:

I’m still athletic. I still like to go outside and do stuff, I’m always moving. I don’t like to just sit on the couch and watch TV and stuff, which is good. I guess it’s pretty healthy.

And it’s always driven me to be a little bit more healthy.

He identifies that his fitness habit of exercise is beneficial and credits it with a more positive health outlook. He sees himself as “driven” to be healthier due to athletic participation.

Anna also noted that in addition to forming a pattern of healthy activity, her increased fitness had a positive effect she had not anticipated:

The strength that I’ve learned through athletics and my breathing and my lungs have actually helped me a lot in music interests because I play a lot – I play instruments and I need a lot of strength to get through my pieces and take long breaths – athletics have actually shaped my body well to be able to perform well.

For young people growing up in an increasingly sedentary society, forming habits of physical activity can have long-lasting—and even unexpected—positive effects.

The participants in this study reported they learned healthy habits due to their athletic participation. Furthermore, many of them claimed they still engage in these healthy habits even though they no longer participate in organized athletics. Athletic participation affected them in a positive way as they lead active lifestyles and feel able to manage stress in beneficial ways.

Theme 3 – Establishing relationships

A number of participants discussed how being part of the team allowed them to establish relationships with others. Through their seasons, participants learned how to treat others respectfully, deal with adversity, and start friendships. Fourteen of the participants said found benefits in their athletic programs as they established lasting relationships during their times with their teams. In essence, athletics gave students opportunities to connect with others in meaningful ways.

Building friendships. For participants, friendship was an important part of the athletic experience. Keith said:

When you play high school sports, you build better bonds with people compared to people who didn't play high school sports . . . When you are going through things like that with people around you it's like it builds better bonds with people that you are with. Cathy responded similarly when she stated, "the biggest benefit is the relationships you build with people." Building friendships is defined as making positive connections with others which turn into lasting relationships.

Jeremy and Mark noticed the social opportunity of building friendships when they became part of teams. For Jeremy, he was no longer confined to one specific age group of students. Being part of an athletic team opened up opportunities to be potential friends with older peers, "[Being part of athletics] introduced me to a lot of older students at the school at the time and I got to know more about people around the school. And it made me feel more mature being on varsity." As part of a team made up of all high school grade levels, he had a broader range of people to make connections. He felt more established than those who may not have had such opportunities.

Mark elaborated on how the time he spent on the team affected him. Like Jeremy, he was able to build relationships that allowed him to feel accepted by older teammates:

Being with the guys on the team . . . building relationships on and off the field was a huge part of high school baseball for me. I got to know a lot of the guys on the team.

Especially in my freshman year – that whole team was 15 seniors that had played together since they were nine years old. So me being a part of that team – I kind of got to experience what they had experienced for so many years in that one year. So it was cool just being a part of that and being a part of the team. That’s kind of what I got from high school baseball- you know, being one of the guys.

Even though he initially identified himself as a freshmen surrounded by upperclassmen, he appreciated that he became “one of the guys” and established a relationship with older students.

Diedre also discussed how being a part of a team, “basically changes your whole high school experience.” She went on to say, “. . . the people you hang out with are a big part of high school. And it gave me a way to connect. You connect with the people that you’re around because you have a common interest through the sport.” Whether or not participants had teammates of different ages, these opportunities allowed them to develop friendships with others they may not have experienced otherwise.

In some cases, the friendships initiated through athletics became family-like bonds. Georgia and Sam identified these connections. Georgia stated:

For the most part, everybody becomes a big family and you all support each other and learn from each other and help each other and . . . you’re basically with your friends the whole time . . . the environment is just very welcoming.

Sam also talked about how his teammates became like family:

[The] athletic program is basically a second family. You have that whole loving support system behind you . . . Being in a sport where everyone is so dedicated, you learn to grow with those people, you grow up with those people. Everyone supports each other and encourages each other to do better.

Anna highlighted how she made her best friends through athletics:

I met my best friends through high school athletics and they're still my best friends today . . . it was satisfying to know that you had a group of supportive people . . . especially for high school students that are trying to find themselves.

Through their athletic participation the participants were able to establish friendships some of which they elevated to a status of second family. Generally, they feel optimistic that they have created positive relationships that may be lasting; however, the participants in this study are not long out of high school. They may experience changes in their lives which may alter their current viewpoints in regards to lasting relationships. Future longitudinal studies could reveal additional data to clarify the impact athletic participation has on relationships.

Learning how to treat others. Participants also reported their experiences affected how they treated others. A common word they used in their descriptions was “humble.” They were humble regarding their athletic accomplishments and looked at others with compassion. Keith stated, “I mainly hung around with my teammates. We always just stayed humble and never let being on a varsity team influence us that much.” Anna talked about how “[athletics] taught me a lot of respect and compassion.” Learning how to treat others is defined as being respectful to others and an acknowledgement of being humble.

Jeremy found athletic success in his program, but also learned perspective in seeing himself as no more important than others. Despite his success in his competition, he learned to be humble. Due to his playoff experiences, he stated “I learned to be humble . . . and not to be cocky about [winning] because it seems like there’s always going to be someone better than you no matter how good you are.” Reaching for his limits gives him the opportunity to see that there are still others who are better.

In describing how she learned to treat others, Emma stated she learned “to be a team player.” She went on to say:

A team player is someone who can easily play with others and get along with others and not just be selfish when playing the sport and being easy to get along with. You’re able to share the things you’re not good with. You can share with others and make each other better and grow together, as a team, instead of by yourself.

Sharing with others builds trust with her teammates and she experiences growth. She shares her experiences and weaknesses in the hopes of generating stronger team bonds.

As stated earlier, Beatrice had a profoundly negative experience in how her teammates treated her. Nevertheless, she still found her experiences affected the way she treated others:

Definitely it taught me the right way to treat people versus the wrong way . . . It was like it changed me in a personal sense to where I would never treat anyone the way that I was treated. I think I’m more of a kind person because of it. I’m understanding. I never think anyone’s ever not good enough because at any minute, someone could come in and take your position. It definitely matured me . . . I guess the biggest thing for me is that I just know the right versus the wrong way of treating people.

Instead of treating others in the negative fashions she experienced, she treats others with kindness. She also states that she is more understanding. She treats others with a respect she learned despite the negative examples set by her older teammates.

Overwhelmingly, the participants in this study felt they found benefit through athletic participation as they established relationships that have lasted past their high school years. It is unknown if these relationships will still continue as they are only a few years removed from their athletic experience; however, the participants did credit that being part of the athletic environment helped them learn how to treat others with care. It is also important to note that not all relationships the participants faced was positive. In the next theme, participants elaborated on some of the challenging relationships they faced with coaches and teammates.

Theme 4 - The challenge of adversity

Not all high school experiences present themselves as worry free. A number of participants discussed how they had to face adversity. Sometimes adversity revealed itself when students were pushed to their physical limits. Sam stated, “You push yourself to be a better person and that really affects your life.” It was in these times that some of the athletes learned foundations of perseverance; they learned how to overcome their limitations to achieve more positive outcomes. The challenge of adversity is defined as experiences which caused the participants to question themselves and their beliefs about their personal limitations. It was through these experiences that the participants reached their physical and psychological limits and then expanded them. Ten of the participants reported they found themselves challenged by their teammates and coaches in ways they described as negative. In reflection, they found the experiences beneficial; however, future data may reveal a different understanding from individuals who may currently be participating on high school teams.

Georgia described how she faced her limitations by pushing herself, “You have to push yourself to the point where you want to stop and then keep going . . . it teaches you perseverance.” She felt she had reached her limit, but continued onward and learned through her physical adversity. Sometimes, adversity manifested itself within contests, personal dealings with teammates, or even balancing time to complete academic and team requirements.

Lance also talked about how he was pushed to his limits. He said, “You have to push yourself to your limits for the best of your ability for your team, so you can participate and you won’t let your team down.” He wants to exceed his limitations and puts pressure on himself to find ways to contribute to team outcomes. He also shares a fear of not wanting to disappoint his teammates.

Sometimes, making it through athletic seasons was challenging, especially when the participants measured their outcomes in team victories. Ignacio talked about how his athletic results as a junior taught him how to persevere:

I was shown the benefits of perseverance and sticking through something when it was hard – like my junior year of football. I didn’t have the year I wanted to have. So going into my senior year, I put in a lot of work and ended up having a very good year . . . I learned better understanding.

The passage of the off season in which the previous year outcome was not acceptable makes Ignacio devote more time and preparation to achieve better results.

Anna described how she learned perseverance through individual contests. In discussing her specific sport she said:

It’s a physical game, but also a big mind game as well. And being able to push yourself through and tell yourself that you could get another game or even just get through the rest

of the match . . . it helps with your confidence. You can just get through hardships in general.

After assessing herself and possible outcomes, she understands that she pushes herself forward; she perseveres in situations where she could lose confidence and finds benefit to overcoming hardships.

Beatrice was a successful high school athlete; however, she learned perseverance in a way far different from the other participants; she faced an obstacle of being accepted by her teammates. She made the varsity team as a ninth grade student, but found that she was not accepted by her older teammates. Through her negative treatment by her teammates, she learns perseverance:

I would come home every single day crying because I wasn't liked. The girls knew how to bring me down, and I let it get to me . . . it affected me greatly. It was the worst three years of my life. . . I guess they say that high school is supposed to be hard, [but] I had to go from classmates to a team—who is supposed to be your support system—who actually were just hostile. And they were just mean. My first three years of high school took a pretty big toll on me . . . the experience taught me honestly how to get good [i.e. improve] through adversity.

She went on to say she had fun during her senior season and that she learned, “what not to do and what kind of teammate not to be. I'd say there's a lot of beneficial factors to it.” Even though she experienced three years of negative behaviors that directly impacted her, she demonstrates perseverance in two ways. In one way, she continues her athletic career even though she faces an unwelcoming environment. In the second, she accepts her experiences, however negative, and reframes them in way that allows her to see them as positively affecting

her. The participants in this study framed their experiences as beneficial; however, it is unclear whether students currently in athletic programs would feel similarly.

Theme 5 – Making the varsity team

Thirteen of the participants reported it was important for them to make the varsity team. Although there are various levels of participation in high school athletics, this highest level of participation became a source of pride for participants. In some cases it was a validation, a sense of belonging to the team group. Whether they participated as JV players in previous years, they shared the common goal of participating at the most competitive level of high school athletics. It was through making the varsity team that they found benefits of being accepted and belonging to a group they valued. Making the team proved initially exciting for the participants. Making the varsity team is defined as completing the necessary physical and mental skills to demonstrate a level of proficiency to teammates, coaches, and self which makes participants part of the high school team. What all the participants shared in common was a desire to be included with their teammates and belong to the collective team. The influence and relationships participants developed with their teammates and their reflections of what it felt like to become part of the team make up this theme.

Making the varsity team was a goal for all the participants. When they realized this goal, they experienced a range of emotions from anxiety to satisfaction. In some ways, it was an eventual progression. All of the participants started in a position in which they did not know their own limitations and their teammates did not know how they would contribute or fit in with the team. Two examples of recognizing individual development and contribution can be seen in Ignacio and Anna's words. Ignacio stated, "It was just a natural progression. Each year you move up another level and this was just moving up another level for me." Anna stated, "It was

very satisfying to know that I had started from the very bottom of the ladder and worked my way up and to know that people actually started to look up to me.”

Initially, all participants experienced a time in which they were judged by their potential teammates. Some participants experienced acceptance while others felt pressure to perform and contribute to their teams in meaningful ways to justify their inclusion on teams. Some found acceptance and assistance from their teammates while others experienced isolation. They all had different ways of dealing with how they perceived being accepted by the team. Lance described this process in a way that reveals he was initially outside of his team, yet he faced the challenge of becoming part of them:

If you look at the team, you're a little kid, you have to show what you have, why are you on the varsity team. You've got juniors and seniors looking down on you all the time because they're better than you, they're older than you, they have more experience than you, so you've just got to show what you have in the first week, in the first day, in the first hour. They're going to judge you right from the start, so you have to prove who you are, why you're on this team and it's a challenge. It's intimidating, especially being a [short] guy . . . Being on the varsity team is a lot better than being on JV [Junior Varsity], better being a higher level of play, more responsibility, and . . . more effort on your part to be involved with the team.

To become part of the team he not only had to showcase his athletic skills in a pressure filled environment, but self-motivate to become more involved. He had to show a desire not just to participate or play the sport, but to become part of the team.

Each of the participants had to deal with insecurities. They did not know whether they were up to the physical challenges presented by the sport nor if they could perform at levels

which would garner acceptance from coaches and teammates. Peter and Georgia explained how they faced their feelings while becoming part of the team. Peter reported:

It was pretty intimidating . . . I always thought it was the highest level of sports that I could play . . . I felt it was big shoes to fill. Like I had to work a lot harder, I had to commit to the full season to the best of my ability.

In Georgia's reflection she said, "When I very first started playing it was kind of a little bit intimidating because there were mistakes you make that you just don't know what you're doing." Whether they felt intimidated by tasks, teammates, or coaches, they overcame their feelings to contribute.

Mark talked about the how he felt the eyes of his teammates on him, yet he still maintained confidence in his ability levels. He also recognized that his teammates faced unfamiliarity with him as he was a newcomer:

I was confident in ability, and I trusted my ability, and I knew that if I went out and performed the way I knew I could perform, I could make the varsity team as a freshman. But I don't think the guys on the team really knew what I was about until I started performing in games . . . until I started backing up my actions with how I acted on the field. [Then] I started getting a lot of respect from the older guys on the team.

Once given the opportunity to perform at the varsity level, the team gives him respect and accepts him as part of the team.

Four of the participants described making the team as exciting. They felt a sense of personal accomplishment and that the skills they demonstrated revealed their worth to their coaches and teammates. Beatrice described it here:

Making the team was actually satisfying to – not to rub it in anyone’s face, but -- to be like, “Hey, obviously I am good enough.” . . . I remember . . . I called my mom when I saw the list. I was super excited. It’s a sense of accomplishment, just that you’ve worked that hard for so many years.

Cathy echoed these sentiments saying, “It was super exciting, super nervous. I mean there’s nothing better to come with that. I couldn’t wait to play in a game.”

Nick tried to put words to his excitement by highlighting what he could not describe: Truly, the excitement was so indescribable. It’s the feeling inside your heart that just – it makes you feel alive and it makes you feel good . . . it just feels good to be like-- I’ve worked my whole life to be here where I am now.

The emotions and work culminating in team acceptance create a moving experience.

Sam talked about how his experience was not only exciting, but also a moment in which he felt a stronger sense of bonding:

I was pretty excited about the whole situation . . . It’s really exhilarating. You are a part of the team [and] you have the sense of just a different sense of belonging to that organization. You’re running with the top dogs. It’s a pretty exhilarating feeling.

He recognizes the kinship with his teammates and senses he is part of an elite group of competitors. When the participants made their teams, they sense an exciting change within themselves that can lead to greater sense of belonging.

Making the varsity team brought the participants into contact with new groups of students that they may not have experienced otherwise. The majority of the participants found benefits to being part of their team and felt validated when they were able to make the team and contribute to team practices and contest outcomes; however, there may have been unreported drawbacks as

well. Coakley and Pike (2009) reported that athletic participation can also promote negative behaviors including hazing and engaging in risky health behaviors. Although none of the participants reported activities of this nature, they may have existed. Future research would need to be conducted to conclusively uncover other facets of making varsity teams.

Theme 6 - Perception of coaches

Coaches were one of the focal people within the participants' athletic experience. In some cases, these adults served as surrogate family members that helped them in both the short and long term. In others, coaches used their influence to affect game outcomes. Perception of coaches is defined as the way athletes saw and made meaning of the actions of the adults who lead their athletic programs and how these adults affected them both during the season and after their high school years concluded. What follows are descriptions, both positive and negative, participants gave regarding the relationships they developed with their coaches. It also gives voice to how these coaches influenced the participant experience.

Benefits of good coaching environments. Some coaches showed genuine caring about participants' well-being and long term goals which far exceeded athletic contexts. Cathy pointed out:

Your coaches have your best interests at heart and no matter what, they're out there to help you get better. They're gonna do what you need them to do and so if they jump on your back . . . it's only to help you get better.

Participants had contradictory views on the influence of coaches. Some saw their coaches as supportive role models while others felt their coaches lacked professionalism and did not devote time to developing positive relationships. Haley talked about how her coaches were a source of support. She said, "[My coaches] really knew how to connect with their athletes and

keep us upbeat and keep our heads in the game, keep us positive about our playing and helped us with our skills.” Generally, her coaches seemed to keep her focused on creating positive team outcomes; however, she goes on to report, “[My coach can be] aggressive and very assertive with us, but he pushes us to make us better players and really improves our talent . . . I feel that he really believes in us and wants to put the time in to work with us.” Haley sees the behaviors of her coach as supporting her goals, but not all participants felt this way.

Cathy touted her coaches were available to talk about anything. “I always was able – always felt comfortable to go and talk to my coaches at any time about anything athletically.” This is not to say she did not recognize problematic aspects within her coach. In a later insight, she recognized how her coach affected her team negatively:

My basketball coach wasn’t always the most [well-]tempered and so you saw as a player sometimes him letting the game get away from him and not really focusing on the game but focusing on different things . . . And the best reaction isn’t always to yell at somebody . . . For certain players, that’s not gonna build them up and build a fire inside of them to go out and do better. And so that’s one thing that I learned to take away is that it’s not always when somebody does something wrong to go out and yell at them.

Despite the fact that she observes some negative behaviors in her coach, she applies context in a way that helps her learn how to communicate with others more effectively. It is important to note that Cathy was one of the few that saw questionable coaching behaviors as acceptable.

Other participants in the study did not share her perspective.

Three of the participants reported how their coaches became family-like mentors. Coaches helped them improve their sport technique and tactics, but the participants also continue to have ongoing relationships with them that transcend athletic contexts. Peter talked about how

his coaches, “are some of my biggest role models. They drove me to improve in the sports I played, in my technique, and as well, to be a good person, to improve the way I interacted with people who weren’t in sports. I still talk to all of my coaches now, or I try to.”

Sam also spoke of how his ongoing relationships with his coaches, “My relationships with my coaches have been awesome. We still speak to this day. They basically are as much in my life as almost my parents are . . . they want to see you succeed in life.” Even though athletic seasons last less than three months, the bond that can develop between the coach and student can become strong enough to overcome long amounts of time and potential distance.

Jeremy spoke of how his coach was like a surrogate parent. “My JV coach . . . was almost like a fatherly figure in a sense but he was there to, not protect us but really prepare us for the future.” He feels his coach directs him in a way that empowers him to face whatever the future holds.

Challenges of negative coaching environments. Beatrice talked about her relationship with her coach as being complex. She created a relationship with him, but unlike Haley, she felt her coach treated her in ways that were not conducive to her growth:

My freshman through junior year I wasn’t that close with my coach, with the head coach. I just tried to stay out of his way, mostly. I did what I did to start to play. He wasn’t my – I love him as a person, but as a coach, he – I felt that he was more towards favoritism, and he didn’t put the best players on the field. It made me not want to get to know him as a coach or a person, so I didn’t really push through.

What Haley may have described as challenges in which she trusted the coach, Beatrice describes as favoritism that distanced her. She went on to elaborate how her senior year was better, “My senior year, I could also say that my coach – the head coach needed me more than he did

[during] my freshman, sophomore, and junior years, so obviously our relationship grew.” She made an eventual connection with the coach due to her longevity in the sport, but it did not seem mutual as she felt the coach needed her to achieve his goals.

Emma played two sports and described her different relationships with them. In one sport, she aspired to find praise even though her coach sometimes did not present her message with enough sensitivity.

I liked her, but she had her days when no one really liked her because she was kind of rude and just not the best person. But, still, I just felt that she still knew what she was talking about. So when I played, I knew that I wanted to impress her, even though she never really had much feedback on how to improve.

Emma felt her coach had knowledge of her sport. Despite her coach’s lack of communicating ways to improve athletic technique, Emma still wanted to impress her coach.

In Emma’s second sport, she did not have a desire to impress the coach as she was unable to make any connection, “I never felt the need to really try my hardest for him or anyone other than myself and my team because he – I just had a bad relationship with him and he was a horrible coach. And so I never really – he made me not want to play.”

Georgia also noticed how she learned from her coaches who did not have the most effective communication skills. Like Beatrice, she notices a favoritism that exists among coaches, but she finds positive ways to reflect on her experience:

Some of my coaches would talk about some of the players or they’d get really angry at the players and, honestly, it taught me that negative reinforcement doesn’t usually work. When you yell or when you say someone sucks at something or things like that, it doesn’t work. It just makes people want to shut down . . . it showed me that you have to have a

positive attitude and you have to be encouraging. If you're putting people down, it's not gonna improve anything. You have to give advice rather than criticism all the time. She manages to take a negative context and see a way she can apply it in a positive way to her life.

The participants' reports on their coaches range from the deeply negative to the profoundly positive. The impact that coaches can have on participants was most eloquently summed up in Diedre's short statement, "I think coaches have a big effect on the team because they kind of set the tone." Whether the tone was negative and singled out individual team members or positive in terms of praise encouraging individual and team growth, the participants developed various perceptions of their coaches which still resonate with them today.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to reveal how high school participants describe their athletic experience and how it continues to affect them in their current lives. After interviews had been transcribed and data had been reduced, the data revealed six distinct themes; establishing relationships, the challenge of adversity, taking ownership, practice and establish healthy habits, making the varsity team, and the perception of coaches. Each of these themes are explained in more detail in the subcategories that help clarify how athletic participation impacted and continues to impact the participants. Although there has been research conducted on athletics, such as the studies described in the literature of this dissertation, little has been devoted to the study of participant testimonials. It is important to understand the voices of athletic participants so we can gain a better understanding of how athletic programs affect participants. This dissertation will help bridge the gap in current research. Chapter 5 discusses the implications and limitations of the data and recommends future areas of study.

Chapter 5

Discussion and Conclusion

This chapter presents an interpretation of the findings of the descriptive study. The research questions explore: How student athletes describe their high school experience and how does their athletic experience influence them in their current lives? A growing body of empirical research focuses on high school athletic participants and this study will add to such research. Such a study may give direction to better designed high school athletic environments which can more effectively support adolescent athletes' growth. In addition, such research may better inform parents, community, and educational leaders about how athletic programs impact youth.

In this chapter I will briefly provide discussion of how this study relates and enhances the current literature, summarize the findings in the study as well as discuss the implications of such findings and how they relate to existing research. In addition, there are sections in this chapter that reveal general recommendations, recommendations for future research, recommendations as they pertain to educational leaderships, limitations of this study, personal reflections on my own limitations as a researcher, a review of how the theoretical framework influenced the study, and a final summary of the chapter.

Discussion

High school athletic participation has been a part of the fabric of high schools since the turn of the twentieth century (Rader, 2009). During these initial years, athletics were narrowed activities with very specific physical benefits. They were used to create healthy men that would support societal values and contribute to a growing workforce (Coakley & Pike, 2009). Since this time, high school athletics have increased in popularity throughout the nation. No longer exclusive, participants of both genders from a wide variety of ethnicities participate. There is

even a growing body of high school athletics, specified as Unified Sports which encourages disabled youth to participate. Despite the growth in participation, little research has revealed the voice of actual participants. It is imperative to learn what actual high school participants experience. This dissertation provides the voice to the participants and further clarifies the literature surrounding high school athletics.

This dissertation also validates some of existing research. It is an experience that allows participants to make friends with each other and work with coaches who influence their lives (Hartmann, Sullivan, & Nelson, 2012;) High school athletes develop better feelings about their physical health and learn to be resilient (Fredricks & Eccles, 2008; Dodge & Lambert, 2008). The participants in this study even clarified moments in which they saw themselves accepting initiative and finding ways to encourage their teammates which validates the Dobosz & Beaty (1999) finding of individuals who experienced leadership growth; however, there are also some distinct differences in the benefits that are reported as well.

The relationship connection. In current literature, nothing was discovered about the depth of relationships that grow between participants; however, in this dissertation we learn about how the relationships affect participants. Going through high school can be a challenging time for many adolescents as they try to become successful adults. Adolescence is a time in which many students begin to find their individual identities and look for ways to connect with others. High school athletic programs allow—in fact, require—students to connect with others. It is important to hear the voice of athletes and how they build relationships through athletics and how those relationships continue to affect them. Through these connections they care for their teammates. Athletic participation expands friend networks giving students an opportunity to build relationships that transcend age level and socioeconomic groupings. These new

relationships can last long after the sport season has completed (Elliot et al., 2007). This dissertation further clarifies current literature by giving explicit examples of how relationships develop through athletic participation.

Current literature states how gender plays a role in the relationship benefits. For instance, female participants have found this connection with others to be particularly important. In a recent Australian study by Eime, et al. (2010), fitting in with peers and building relationships was one of the primary reasons female students became part of teams. One of the female athletes in this study, Haley, demonstrated a level of care and empathy that was not conveyed in the literature review. She talks about developing a connection that seems to describe a type of resiliency; an ability to face obstacles with others in a shared way that makes the participants collectively better. The closest connection to the literature regarding this care deals with resiliency described in the Fredricks & Eccles (2008) study. A key aspect of resiliency is the ability to develop problem solving skills, “Observations of youth in and out of school contexts support this argument: when youth work on challenging problems, they develop plans, monitor their strategies in response to feedback, and engage in problem solving” (Fredricks & Eccles, 2008, p. 1040). Athletes felt responsible for contest outcomes, practiced to achieve greater win/loss ratios, and desired team approval and acceptance. They also understood they needed to find ways to manage time to complete academic coursework and maintain athletic proficiency.

Before her athletic experience she did not know her teammate, but when her teammate’s house burned down, she was compelled to help. As a teammate, she saw herself as more than responsible for her teammate’s athletic growth, but showed genuine concern for her well-being. She also went on to say that she feels the bonds with her teammates will continue.

Nevertheless, if athletes are going to realize benefits of creating meaningful relationships, it is critical to understand what role the athletic experience plays in the process. This dissertation shows how athletic participation provides new strategies for young people to create connections. Here, Lance describes how the ease with pickup games he developed in high school has stayed with him in college:

Playing water polo, basketball, swimming, and volleyball has given me a wide variety of skills to actually meet other people. [Even now] people ask you, “Hey, you want to play a pick-up game of basketball?” Or, “You want to play some beach volleyball today after class?” You get to meet new people, you can widen your variety of people or activities at the university, or if you’re not at a university, somewhere else.

Being part of an athletic program can give participants a way to make personal connections with others.

Participants also demonstrated care and concern for others—something that usually develops over time and requires ongoing attention and awareness. Initially, participants may focus on making connections with their teammates; they want to become part of the team and justify why they should be there with more established peers. To earn respect they must show they are responsible enough to garner such acknowledgement. Mark reflected that although he was initially concerned with belonging:

[It wasn’t until] I started backing up my actions with how I acted on the field [that] I started getting a lot of respect from the older guys on the team. . . [then] I knew that my team trusted me and that was a kind of respect.

Participation in athletics also allows students to make friends across the spectrum of grade level. Most high school academic classes are grouped by grade level; however, athletic programs are grouped by ability level. First year freshmen may contribute to the highest level of competitive varsity programs and first year juniors may contribute to junior varsity programs depending on the pool of participants at any given school. This allows students to establish relationships with others who may be older or younger than their usual academic classmates (Petitpas, Van Raalte, Cornelius, & Presbrey, 2004). Jeremy talked about this experience when he said:

It opens up more communication to, like, higher grades. Because when you first get to high school you're separated by grade levels [so] you don't have the same classes with everybody. But once you start to play sports, you see the older kids playing – and especially for me I wanted to be more like them. I wanted to get better. I always looked up to them. And so having people close to you who are a lot older [is good] and they'll watch your back and you'll watch their back.

Although Jeremy doesn't specifically say that the older students are part of his network of friends, he does see them as role models and implies that they do share a mutual relationship of care.

In more current literature, we also see that athletic participation enables students not only to create relationships that bridge age and gender differences but also those that transcend different economic backgrounds. In the Holt, Kingsley, Tink, and Scherer (2011) study on how athletics affects low income parents and children in Canada, they found participants expanded their social networks beyond those that did not participate in sports. Furthermore, students of low income backgrounds that did not have an opportunity to participate in high school athletics

found it more challenging to expand social ties with others. I didn't discover the ways in which the participants in this study differed economically, but this may be an important area for future study.

It is also through forming relationships through athletics, we see participants feel more confident about themselves. Randall and Bohnert (2012) discussed the impact of organized activities on how 9th and 10th graders made connections. They found that when students participated in organized activities, including high school athletics, there was an increase in perceived friendship and a decrease in depression. This was especially so for male participants who came from lower income families. The study also revealed that this increased positive self-perception and decreased depression was linked to organized activities that did not exceed five to seven hours a week. In this dissertation I did not uncover the amount of time participants spent in their activities on a weekly basis; however, it is probable that these participants had longer contact times than seven hours a week. Normal practice times within the district studied usually fell within the range of two to three hours a day five days out of the week. The aspect of time spent to positive outcomes may also need further exploration.

The experience of team activities, of sharing a variety of stresses and obstacles together through athletic pursuits, creates bonds that participants may not form in regular academic classes (Elliot et al., 2007). Cathy identified her perception of the difference between her classes and athletics when she said:

In the classroom, it's more personal and it's yourself [but] with athletics it's about a team . . . Being an athlete gives you something more than [being] a regular student. I think that just the benefits of friendships and relationships you build with people who I guess that

you may have never talked to if you're just walking by them on a normal day on campus are the biggest benefits of athletics.

The relationships that the athletes develop also have the potential to last long after athletic seasons end. Ignacio, who was now in his third year of college, said, "I have better friendships and new friendships through high school sports that I still carry with me today. I'd say all of my best friends from home are a direct link from playing sports in high school." The athletic experience allows students to create strong bonds with each other and even years after the end of the season, participants still look at these relationships as being important to them.

The influence athletes place on these relationships cannot be understated; some of them see their teammates as family. Sam described his "second family" and how it changed him:

The most beneficial part that I could pull from our athletic program is basically a second family. You have that whole loving support system behind you. A lot of people don't even have that to begin with. Being in a sport where everyone is so dedicated, you learn to grow with those people . . . Everyone supports each other and encourages each other to do better. I can definitely see how much athletic programs have changed [other students'] lives.

In situations in which students face broken homes or other family challenges, the athletic team may be a valuable support system for students to have a healthy, safe environment which fosters their growth such as the one Sam describes above.

Related to what Sam discovers about herself, many of the participants also discussed how they learned to be better people by caring for themselves and others. This was not reported in my initial literature review; however, in a search outside of empirical research, I did find a connection through the governing bodies of athletics. Athletes face many situations in which

they test their limits and learn character. In Michael Josephson's book, *The Power of Character* (1998), he acknowledges that some believe that character is permanently set early in life and cannot be changed; however, he challenges this belief. Josephson (1998) sees character as an element of people that is malleable, "Hence the power to control our actions is the power to control our character, and the power to control our character is the power to control our lives." (Josephson, 1998, p. 3) In this dissertation, character is defined under the Josephson (1998) model, as the moral and ethical qualities that make up an individual.

Michael Josephson is one of the benchmark leaders in the study and implementation of character programs. After 20 years of teaching law, he found the Josephson Institute of Ethics in 1987 (Josephson, 1998). Although I could find no direct empirical research studies, Josephson's works, including the "Six Pillars of Character," have been used as models for a variety of businesses, government organizations, and schools (Josephson, 1998). In California, the "Six Pillars of Character" are commonly referenced as areas of emphasis for administrators, coaches, and athletes. Although such practices are not mandatory, they are an integral part of the high school athletic governing body in California, the California Interscholastic Federation (CIF) and many other states. The CIF has adopted these six pillars of character which can be found in its mission statement:

The CIF governs interscholastic athletics, promoting equity, quality, character and academic development...

Principles of character – Trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring and good citizenship.

(www.cifstate.org/index.php/vision-a-mission, 11/2012)

Many of these principles of character require individuals to take ownership of their own actions; to be responsible, respect others, and honor individual, team, and school commitments. Taking ownership of actions is one of the emergent themes of this study shown in Figure 3. Part of taking ownership involves learning to be responsible and responsibility is one of the pillars of character.

For example, these athletes frequently described aspects of their participation that taught them responsibility. Whether it was caring for their teammates' wellness, contributing to the positive image of their school or program, or even being more driven to focus on academics in order to continue eligibility to participate, high school athletics contributed to their development of responsibility. Emma describes the breadth of responsibilities she associated with her athletic experience:

It [athletics] teaches you a lot, and it makes you be more responsible with, like, doing school as well because you have to learn how to manage your time and do your homework but still go to practice. And you have more responsibilities on the team, and you learn how to be a team player when you play on team sports, which I think is important.

Being responsible in athletics requires an ability to set limitations and prioritize actions. Students managed their time to balance their academic and athletic commitments. As a result of their athletic participation, they came to see themselves as more responsible. As Emma illustrates, this appears to relate to their development of self-concept. This dissertation gives voice to how athletic participants exercise character to affect those around them.

Demonstrating responsibility by managing time was important to participants, another factor that is not covered in the literature. They had to balance their academic, social, and

athletic responsibilities. Their reports suggest that although this sometimes presents challenges, it also brings a realization of their capacity for self-control and that they can forgo immediate gratification in order to reach longer term goals. Diedre talked about how she sacrificed parts of her social life to satisfy her determination to improve athletically:

If my friend would be like, “Oh, let’s go do this.” I would just be like, “Well, you know I have to make sure that I go running first” because that was something that I really cared about, where before I’d be like, “Oh yeah, I’m down [with that]. I’m gonna go [with you] right away.” I thought [my change in perspective] was good because I was determined to do something [to better my athletic skill.]

In this instance, the athlete reduced social obligations to maintain athletic excellence. It is unclear whether others might choose to sacrifice academics rather than social life in order to maintain athletic excellence; however, there is some built-in limitation to this option as all high school athletes must maintain certain grade point averages to participate in athletics. Apparently these athletes successfully completed their seasons of sport, and may not have faced this dilemma, but Diedre’s words again echo the Fredricks and Eccles (2008) study on how athletic participants demonstrate increased levels of resiliency. Future studies could focus on athletes who did not complete their seasons and the various reasons for incompleteness.

Emma also points out that she has more responsibilities to manage. Responsibility is an element in Josephson’s pillars of character. Although Fejgin (1994) does not talk about responsibility, per se, he does talk about how athletic participants increase their self-control. “Self-control” and “responsibilities” are not interchangeable, but they are similar in that Emma takes more responsibility for her actions and commitments to her team. Consequently, she practices a more self-controlled lifestyle.

Essentially, these participants found ways to manage their responsibilities to improve themselves which included practicing self-control. This study adds further definition to how participants use problem solving skills to balance their commitments; they practice responsibility, an element of character, by taking ownership of their actions to find both individual and collective benefit. In learning these skills the participants also found themselves in positions they could lead.

In current literature, Dobosz & Beatty (1999) discuss how those who participate in athletics have increased opportunities to demonstrate leadership. One of the facets of leadership is unifying others to work towards a common goal. This requires both focus and determination collectively. Successful athletes cannot dedicate themselves only to their own development; they have to attend to the development of the team as well. Being part of the team ultimately means accepting responsibility for contributing to group outcomes. It was in these times that some participants demonstrated courage and began to lead others. For example, Ignacio took charge of his team during halftime at one contest when he was not satisfied with the team effort:

I was embarrassed because I knew we were a much better team than we were showing . . . [I addressed the team by saying] “this is not what we came here for.” It was the first time I had ever had to lead in a vocal way, instead of just by example, to show them, “This is unacceptable. This kind of effort isn’t acceptable.” It was the first time I had felt that I had to push myself out of my comfort zone and assert myself as a leader.

In another instance, Gina described a similar situation:

I forget what team we were playing, but there was one game where we had been having a little bit of drama with the coaches and I think a lot of younger players especially were feeling it a lot more from the coaches because they had never been in that situation before

where coaches yell at you or are disappointed. And so I kind of stepped in and had to be like it's okay, you just have to keep encouraging. I had to keep their morale up a little bit and show the younger girls that you lose sometimes and people get mad, but after that happens you have to keep going.

Although Gina does not use the term “leader” to describe her efforts in the concrete terms that Ignacio does, she does exercise leadership. Both of the athletes take initiative in their respective situations and gather the support of those around them to improve the collective effort. This appears to echo the Dobosz and Beatty (1999) findings that athletes experience interpersonal and organizational growth, a facet of leadership. Some of the participants in this study reported they experienced growth in learning how to see themselves, understanding the roles they played on their teams, and accepted the role of leadership to help their teams find better outcomes. It is through this dissertation that we gain specific athlete perspectives from the voice of actual participants such as the one Gina describes above.

To exercise leadership, the participants needed to change how they viewed themselves. A further example of this interpersonal growth is elaborated here. Once participants feel accepted by their teammates, they develop stronger bonds with those around them and demonstrate care. The athletes' drive to prove they belong changes them. They are compelled to face obstacles together, even if the obstacles are not related to sport. In one particular instance, Haley talked about how her teammate faced the hardship of losing her home.

. . . the first people she came to was us, was her team. Because even though we don't know her family or anything that happened, we were there for her and helped her get through it. And she said it made it a lot easier for her to come to practice because we helped her get her mind off of that . . . I think that it really proves that you learn how to

care about someone because even though she's just a teammate, someone that you play a sport with, your friendships grow and you do care about that person outside that sport.

It could be argued that Haley might have felt responsible to help her teammate because eventual game and season outcomes could be affected if her teammate fell apart. This may have been part of her thinking; however, she does not talk about game outcomes, but the development of relationships. She cares about her teammate. This demonstrates how her athletic mindset has extended "outside of sport." She no longer sees herself as individually beholden to herself, but has experienced a growth which manifests itself in genuine care for others. This also connects to another aspect of the literature review, self-concept development.

Self-concept development. Development of character may bring individuals confidence and this leads to the literature regarding self-concept theory. "Self-concept, is described as "a person's perceptions of him- or herself. These perceptions are formed through experience with and interpretations of one's environment" (Marsh & Shavelson, 1985, p.107). Given this definition, it is clear that character and self-concept can influence other. As individuals develop their ability to see themselves differently, they make better decisions considering how their actions influence others. They are also affected by coaches, teammates, parents, and others who can influence these athletes in ways that can both help or hinder their character development and self-concept. Whether it is in response to the perceived hostile environment of an away game or to receiving praise from coaches for plays run to perfection, students learn more about themselves, the people around them, and their environment.

Furthermore, athletic participants benefit from seeing and experiencing themselves in different contexts not present in daily academic coursework. For example, in competing against other students from different schools, they must work together consistently and effectively with

their teammates and coaches to improve their skills to achieve positive outcomes. As athletes work towards these goals, they have the capacity to develop both character and self-concept.

Also in this dissertation, the participants described how athletic environments gave them a setting to experiment with leadership. By being part of a team, they have firsthand knowledge of how different types of interactions affect them. They may experience support or negative feedback from any number of stakeholders including coaches or other teammates. Teams focus on a common goal of working together toward victory over opponents; however, different teams, participants, and coaches may prioritize one particular facet of the team experience over others. Regardless of the priority, participants are better served when they have supportive environment. Petitpas, Cornelius, Van Raalte, and Jones (2005) discuss how athletic environments allow students to experiment and change their value structures when they are supported:

Value acquisition and positive youth development are most likely to occur when young people are (a) in an appropriate context for self-discovery, (b) are surrounded by positive external assets, (c) acquire internal assets, and (d) benefit from the findings of an on-going evaluation system. (Petitpas et al., 2005, p.76)

Beatrice talked about how she changed due to her athletic experience: “Definitely it taught me the right way to treat people versus the wrong way. It was – it was – I don’t know how to explain it. It was like – it changed me in a personal sense . . . it matured me.” This is not a definitive connection to leadership, but suggests that an environment that allows participants to share their values with others, to learn how to treat others, may be conducive to developing leaders as they can test their ideas. Future research is necessary to find out how athletes perceive to what extent leadership develops in athletic contexts and if they exercise leadership outside of athletic settings.

To the current state of empirical research, this study adds athletes' own perspective of how participation affects their lives. Athletes do face circumstances that are different than what they face in academic classes. Teachers may focus on learning correct academic applications with an emphasis on maintaining honesty and integrity as cheating and plagiarism are not acceptable in academia. This lesson is also present in athletics; however, parents, community members, and media often communicate their own values of winning above ethical lessons and this creates its own set of challenges (Naylor & Yeager, 2013). Participants face learning to balance these competing behaviors in an environment that can activate individual leadership.

Coach influence. Throughout the study, participants described many ways that their coaches influenced them. In this way, this dissertation validates current research. Some students saw their coaches as surrogate parents with decidedly positive and lasting effects on them. In many cases, these coaches became role models whom they wanted to impress. As Sam stated:

My relationships with my coaches have been awesome. We still speak to this day. They basically are as much in my life as almost my parents . . . we had an awesome relationship and . . . they just want to see you succeed and become a better person.

Athletic participants tend to strive for their coaches' approval and look to them for reinforcement.

As coaches are charged to be the adult leaders of high school athletics, their influence cannot be underestimated. Coaches provide challenges to participants, but they sometimes face their own challenges in finding ways to motivate their team. The way coaches interact with participants can have profound effects. On the positive side, they can foster resolute athletes who will work toward team goals; from a negative perspective, they can so diminish individuals belief in themselves, that participants quit sports entirely (Eime, Payne, Casey, & Harvey, 2013).

Since all the athletes interviewed for this study had successfully completed their sports program, the negative experiences some of them experienced with coaches never reached that level. Fortunately, some participants found value even when their coaches exhibited questionable behaviors. Peter commented on this aspect of his coach's behavior:

To a certain extent, I guess you could consider [I learned] how to play a little dirty in those sports. I think that maybe in some aspects I could have taken that [message] from coaches, but I always saw it as a way to improve my skill in those sports as well.

Despite his coach's sometimes unprofessional guidance, Peter used this experience to work towards improvement. Similarly, when Gina saw her coach yelling at players, she resolved that her own communications would always remain professional. "[Sometimes] my coaches would talk about some of the players or they'd get really angry at [us] and honestly it taught me that negative reinforcement doesn't usually work. I learned you just don't treat people like that—and it doesn't help them improve, either."

Beatrice described yet another example of an unsupportive coach. She also described learning to treat others better despite the fact that she experienced poor treatment from one of her coaches:

Definitely it taught me the right way to treat people versus the wrong way. . . I would never treat anyone the way that I was treated. I think I'm more of a kind person because of it. I'm understanding. I never think that anyone's ever not good enough because at any minute, someone could come in and take your position. It definitely matured me, I'd like to say. I guess the biggest thing for me is that [now] I just know the right versus the wrong way of treating people.

Coaches do hold positions of influence as they interact with their teams each day; however, this study provides another illustration of how some coaches do not fully understand how their words and actions influence those they supervise. Just as the Scantling and Lackey (2005) study found that some coaches “may lack human interaction skills,” we need to make coaches aware of the influence they have over athletes so they are able to maximize potential rather than stunt development.

The participants had varied positive and negative experiences with their coaches. In current research, Flett, Gould, Griffes, and Lauer (2013) completed a qualitative study regarding effective and ineffective coaches of underserved youth. They found that both ineffective and effective coaches engaged in both positive and negative reinforcement; however, ineffective coaches tended to engage with students in more negative tones such as yelling and derogatory comments. In addition, it was unclear to what extent the coaches’ negative behaviors affected participants in a more general life context. Surprisingly, as Peter and Beatrice illustrated above, this study demonstrates that some athletes can find benefits in their athletic experiences even when their coaches treat them in ways that are not positive.

Although this study had participants who found positive outcomes amidst negative coaches, this dissertation confirms and stresses the power of coaching influence should not be underestimated. A coach impacts participants regardless of whether they use positive or negative behaviors (Shields et al, 2007). Furthermore, coaches share their values with students whether or not they have been informed on what effect they have on athletes. Those coaches who embrace the positive role model relationship with their students are better able to impart their philosophies which may help students develop skills they can transfer to other areas of their life (Camire, Trudel, & Forneris, 2012). For example, those coaches who emphasize and value leadership

may be more successful in imparting such characteristics to the athletes when they allow and reward participants with time to experiment with leadership. Coaches who understand that they can influence the environment to allow experimentation are more likely to have athletes transfer the skills outside of athletics to broader life contexts (Trottier & Robitaille, 2013). Under the direction of coaches who create supportive environments, the students develop, but additional research will be necessary to confirm how long these benefits last and to explore some of the negative impacts coaches may have on those they supervise.

Physical and mental health benefits. One of the benefits participants spoke of was an increased understanding of and practice of healthy habits. Current literature surrounds on the physical and mental benefits of exercise, but little is actually known on the effect high school athletic participation may have on this outcome. It is important to listen to actual participants to discern if high school participation may lead to better physical and mental health; this dissertation adds to current literature and provides some examples of how athletes feel about their physical and mental states due to their participation. One of the findings was that participants in this study continued to practice healthy exercise routines in their daily lives as much as five years later; many felt they have established life-long exercise habits. Adolescence is a stage of life in which individuals go through tremendous physical and psychological change. It is also a time of decreasing physical fitness activity especially in girls (Labbrozzi, Robazza, Bertollo, Bucci, & Bortolli, 2013; Waylen, & Wolke, 2004). Given the current international obesity epidemic in young people, this has tremendous potential importance. Furthermore, the health benefits that accrued to participants is not solely limited to physical exercise. Keeping good physical exercise habits increases self-confidence in adolescents (Labbrozzi et al., 2013).

In some cases, athletes also learn the importance of developing and maintaining healthy eating habits. In Sam's discussion of health benefits he stated, "You're going to the gym . . . You're eating healthier. You're eating right. You're living a better lifestyle for it." If such results can be found in larger studies, this finding can be an important contribution to the conversation about how to create healthier habits early in life.

Youth obesity is a growing problem in the United States (Lee, Lee, Guo, & Harris, 2011). This study adds weight to the importance of involving students in high school athletic programs as they may help promote lifelong health habits. In a related study, Greve and Anderson (2012) discussed an increase of obesity in the Danish population; however, when Danish high school students took an active role in tracking their physical activities they dramatically lowered the instances of student obesity. In conjunction with teachers who helped support the process, students lowered their body mass index (BMI) to healthier levels.

For physical education programs to be effective, participants need to take part in activities that do not make them feel inferior. When physical education programs focus on activities that tap into students' perceived levels of competence, it increases the likelihood of developing healthy habits (Taylor, Ntoumanis, Standage, & Spray, 2010). In other words, if students engage in activities that allow them to create or maintain a positive self-image, they are more likely to continue with the activity. Anna talked about how she still stays physically active due to her athletic experience:

I'm not actively like on any sort of athletic teams right now. But it's given me the motivation to like go out and play [physical activity] with people – be with people and have fun and it's a fun social thing to be [active] with friends.

Although Anna doesn't address obesity, she does demonstrate motivation to continue physical activity. Thus, high school athletic participation may help combat obesity that begins in adolescence. The participants in this study described and currently practice healthy exercise habits that appear to have originated in their high school athletic programs.

Another important part of developing healthy exercise habits may involve giving participants choices of activities. Gillison, Standage, and Skevington (2011) found positive self-image can come from exercise that is cooperative and involves choice of activity.

[Several possibilities exist] for designing social exercise environments that support motivation, and reduce the negative effect of poor body image. These include providing opportunities for cooperative exercise activities, providing self-referenced informational feedback, and emphasizing choice and personal control, and focusing adolescents away from weight control as a reason for exercise, and on to more intrinsic goals that are still meaningful to them. (p.50)

In other words, to maximize health benefits, participants need to have various choices of activities, self-determine their commitment levels, and have social interactions with others. This dissertation suggests that the participants in this study did create lasting health habits due to their voluntary participation in high school athletics; they were able to choose which sports to participate.

In a more recent study Eime, Harvey, Sawyer, Craike, Symons, Polman, and Paine (2013) discovered diminishing team participation in females from the 7th through 11th grade. Interestingly, they did not find a significant drop in physical activity, but more of a migration as former 7th grade participants moved to more individual activities to maintain fitness, such as running or swimming, which gave them more flexibility to exercise when they wished rather

than having to schedule time around team activities. In fact, participants who feel pressured to complete exercise, rather than relying on their intrinsic motivation, are less likely to sustain lifelong healthy exercise patterns (Rose, Parfitt, & Williams, 2005). To alleviate such pressures, athletic programs can provide a choice of activities and practice times. This may give potential participants power to decide which athletic activity is best suited to their scheduling limitations.

Ultimately, providing more flexibility and choice may be a more effective way for athletic programs to establish healthy exercise habits. Of course, not all athletic activities are individual and this does not suggest that all high school sports activities should be individual. In fact, Slutzky and Simpkins' (2009) found that those individuals who did not participate in team formats reported lower self-esteem when compared to those participants who were part of organized team activities. What is clear is that additional research on athletic participation and physical and mental health benefits. This dissertation brings athlete voice to current literature by stating what participants feel are the perceived benefits and drawbacks which has not been covered previously.

In summary, participants reported a number of benefits due to their athletic participation. They experienced support in self-concept growth and first hand experiences that allowed them to develop character. It was through these activities that they also experimented with leadership not only learning from the coaches around them, but also demonstrating leadership in certain situations. They also learned physical fitness habits that still continue today. Most importantly, they built relationships with their teammates that have continued to last through their transition to adulthood.

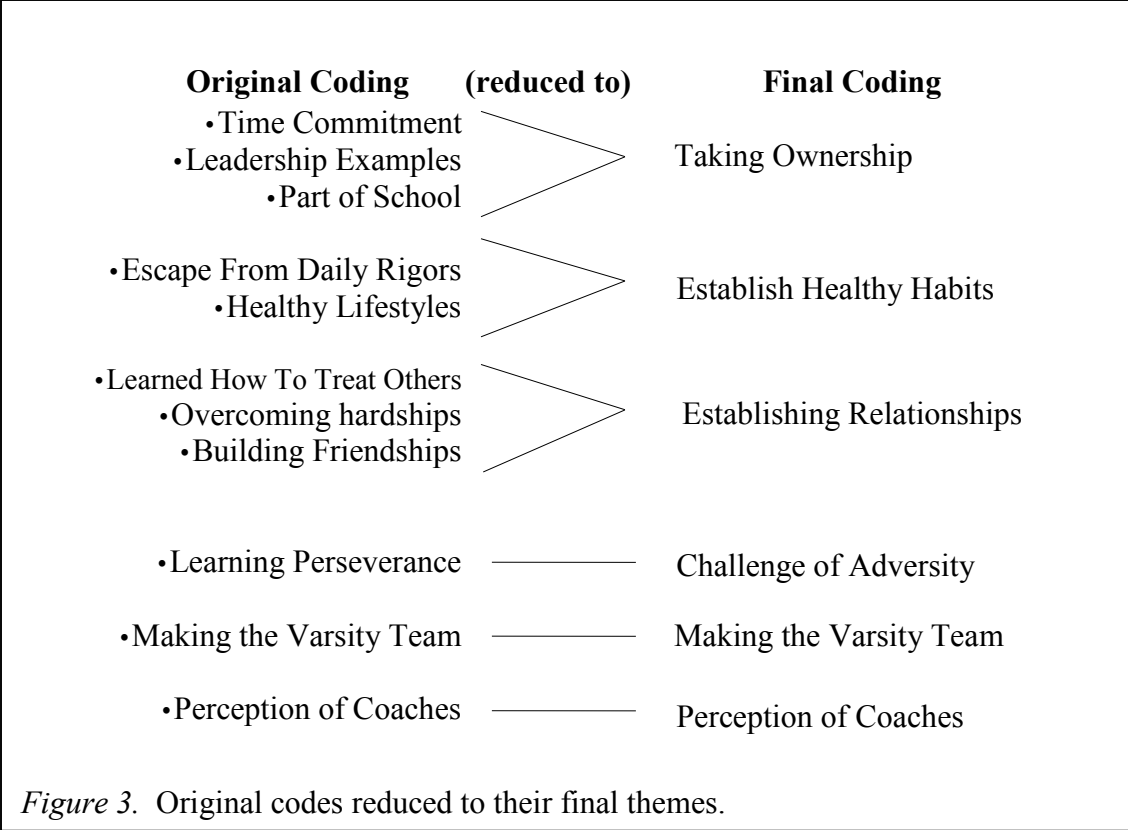
This is not to say that all of the athletic experience is positive. The participants experienced a fair amount of negative reinforcement from their coaches. The participants in this

study were able to find value even in the times coaches acted in negative fashions; however, this mindset may be the exception rather than the rule. The following section briefly summarizes the steps of this study for future research and to clarify technique.

Summary of study

This was an exploratory, descriptive study which explored the following research questions: How do student athletes describe their high school athletic experiences and how do these experiences affect them in their current lives? I wanted to find out what the athletes had to say about their experiences in order to discover the impacts of athletic participation and how to make such activity more beneficial and meaningful. Though there is limited research reporting the benefits and drawbacks of athletic participation in collegiate students as well as those who participate in middle and elementary schools, few empirical studies to date have explored how high school athletes describe their experience.

The participants in this study described several ways in which their high school athletic experience benefitted them. Participants credited athletics with giving them opportunities to develop character by learning responsibility, taking ownership of their actions, and better managing their time commitments. They also found moments in which they demonstrated initiative and leadership. All experienced benefits from working with their coaches even if their mentors did not provide the most positive role models. For most, physical exercise and other healthy habits that started through athletics continued beyond high school. Finally, the athletes built relationships that persevered and many anticipate these relationships will be lifelong. These findings emerged through data analysis as seen in figure 3 which illustrates the original codes and their connection to the final themes. As posited in Chapter 1, these findings confirmed how participants gained direction as they navigated their paths from adolescence to adulthood.



These findings were based upon a semi-structured questionnaire with 13 open ended questions (Appendix X). I used a convenience sample drawn from two local high schools. To find participants who had enough distance in time to bring meaningful reflection to their athletic experience, yet not be so far removed to have forgotten salient details, I chose former high school athletes who had graduated between two to four years earlier. Eighteen students were interviewed of whom three completed pilot interviews; given geographical distance (several students were away in college), most interviews were conducted over GoogleVoice, which led to some technological difficulties, described in Chapter 4. What follows are more detailed descriptions regarding self-concept and character development findings as they relate to the study participants, more specific examples of how athletics activates leadership, the importance the coach plays in creating environments which allow students to learn and build relationships with each other, and a final look at how athletics affects self-image.

Conclusions of the study

Whether or not students participate, high school athletics is part of the fabric of the high school experience. This dissertation explores the high school athletic experience from the voice of the athlete and describes how it affects participants in their current lives. There are a number of conclusions that are drawn from this study. Foremost, high school athletics had a positive impact on the lives of participants. There were some participants who did have negative experiences, but they framed these experiences in a way that they were able to create meaning that allowed them to grow. One of the things that stands out most from this study is the influence coaches have on the participants. Like the cliché in education that the choice of teacher can make all the difference to a struggling student, the same adage may be applied to athletic contexts as well. With this being the case, coach education needs to be emphasized to give coaches the necessary information and skills to succeed in affecting athletes positively. The primary recommendation is for continued—and perhaps, expanded—emphasis on coach training so coaches can better understand their role and how they impact participants. If coaches are better prepared for their roles, they will be more able to create successful outcomes for all participants that will go far beyond the actual score of individual games. If coaches emphasize the Josephson character model over game outcomes, participants may learn more meaningful goals that will continue to impact their lives long after high school.

Athletics also provide an environment that allows individuals to develop their self-concept. It allows individuals to see how they can not only affect their personal growth, but collective team growth and may lead to instances in which they can exercise leadership. This further validates and clarifies the Dobosz & Beatty (1999) study.

We also take away that the participants feel generally healthier than those that do not participate. They talk about how they have a physical outlet that they utilize to not only stay physically healthy, but as a way to manage stress levels within them leading to better mental health. What follows are brief implications of these findings, recommendations, and opportunities for future research.

Coach training. This study suggests that it is important to develop more effective training for coaches. Coaches may need to be exposed to best practices which focus on students' physical, psychological, and social development. Coaches also need to be aware of the potential harm they can do if they do not pay attention to how they interact with the athletes. Like any hierarchical organization, there are a variety of differences in coaching requirements as they vary by state and this may create some obstacles in preparing coaches. Athletic departments may also need to prepare athletic supervisors to become part of a system of active observation and mentoring that focuses both students and coaches on ways to maximize the benefits of athletic programs.

An increased understanding of the athletic experience and effective methods of instruction will equip more decision makers and maximize potential (Lee et al., 2008; Denham, 2009). Coaches have a tremendous influence on those they supervise and they can affect the behavior of their athletes (Shields et al., 2007). Emma pointed out that one of the drawbacks of her athletic experience may have been related to inadequate coach training:

He didn't know how to give constructive criticism. He would only just either tell you what you were doing wrong but never how to improve. And he didn't know how to act like a coach. He didn't know how to perform during the games either . . . I felt like he didn't really understand the sport that much.

Here, Emma has a desire to participate and improve in her chosen sport, but sees her coach as an obstacle. Perhaps this is due to irreconcilable differences of opinion of what the high school sport should look like; however, her failure to connect may be the result of an unprepared coach. If the coaches act in ways which do not allow them to connect, they become ineffective and can create negative experiences for athletes (Sage, 2008).

All states have certification requirements for coaches. Coaches can access these requirements through National Federation of High Schools (NFHS.org), the governing body of high school athletics; however, there is no uniformity in the amount of training for certification in each state. For example, coaches in California must be CPR and First Aid certified while those in Alaska do not need such certification. Exploring ways to bring uniformity and expand such training as necessary in those geographic states that hold differences may create more knowledgeable coaches. Additional training could include elective classes through the NFHS or local level mentoring programs.

Another way to address coach training is to better supervise athletic coaches. Many athletic directors and administrators face challenges in supervising coaches that lead athletic programs. Most schools see the athletic director and coaching positions as part-time positions. In most cases, they are yearly stipend positions that lack job security (Scantling & Lackey, 2005). Coaches need to feel supported if they are to make positive impacts on students (Feltz et al., 1999). In some cases, academic teachers play a dual role of teacher and athletic coach. They need to be taught effective ways to manage both leadership roles. If dual roles create competing priorities in our nation's quest to better see statistical data of academic core subject improvement, the benefits of athletic participation can sometimes be obscured.

Active supervision by those who supervise coaches does not only entail being present at events, but working with coaches to help them improve themselves, improve school programs, and learn about the unique perspective of seeing what is best for the students they supervise. Coaches may have trouble objectively seeing how their behaviors are perceived by those they lead. Beatrice spoke of how the regular actions of her coach affected her when she said, “I felt that he was more towards favoritism, and he didn’t put the best men on the field. It made me not want to get to know him as a coach or a person so I didn’t really [see him as serious about equal treatment.]” With many of the participants reflecting on their coaches as a person of influence, it appears coaches could help athletes in a variety of ways if they developed relationships based on trust and understanding. If coaches have objective supervision to help *coach them* on how best to reach out to athletes, situations like the one above may be alleviated. It is important to clarify that such supervision needs to be done in a way that values observation and self-reflection to find improvement for both the coach and student athlete. Athletic programs, need to be fun and emphasize growth (Eitzen & Sage, 2008). If adequate supervision leads to better coaching, participants may have a better athletic experience. In order to create effective athletic programs which allow students to create relationships and maximize potential, we need to equip our athletic supervisors, coaching personnel, and parents with best training and supervision methods. If coaches are successful in creating positive environments, it may be possible to maximize the development of self-concept which is discussed in the next subtheme.

Self-concept and athletics. Being part of athletics allowed the participants to gain new perspectives. It also gave them confidence academically. One of the participants talked about how her confidence athletically could lead to better academic performance. This alteration of confidence can liberate participants to see themselves in new roles, even enabling them to

explore leadership among peers. If participants do gain confidence through athletics, it is possible that they alter their self-concept as described by Shavelson et al. (1976).

In previous studies, Slutzky and Simpkins (2009) did examine sport self-concept in elementary and middle school students, but they did not examine high school athletic participants nor distinguish the relationship self-concept may have in particular sports. Further self-concept studies could focus on subdivisions of self-concept such as specific sport self-concept.

Marsh, Gerlach, Trautwein, Ludtke, and Brettschneider (2007) also chose to focus their studies on elementary students and how their participation affected their self-perception. Being the case, additional studies could focus on actual high school participants and study the development of specific divisions of social, academic, and athletic self-concept.

Recognizing growth in athletic and academic areas suggests growth in self-concept (Shavelson, 1976). As Gina stated in her interview:

[Athletics] can help people by . . . giving them a good environment . . . it helps kids who aren't necessarily the best in the classroom have something they are good at and have something they can succeed in besides academics. And, through simply succeeding at this one thing, a lot of times it can help them succeed in academics also. . . Kids who aren't dedicated [academically] to the books will get their grades up in order to play.

There is also a hint that participants may find motivation to improve one aspect of self-concept. If participants enjoy athletic activity, they may be guided to develop other areas to continue to meet participation requirements.

Lasting exercise habits. This study focused on participants who had been out of high school from two to four years. Many of them said they had found athletic activity had led them to have current healthy habits; however, it is unclear whether or not these habits will continue.

None of the participants had entered the workforce as fully employed. As they transition to productive economic adults the question arises if these participants will still engage in healthy habits. Continued longitudinal studies will be needed to verify if participants can maintain their current habits of exercise.

Limitations

Several limitations that affected the outcomes of the study became apparent as it unfolded. I describe these as sample, research, and technological limitations. Sample limitations refer to the size and makeup of the sample. Research limitations relate to my potential bias as well as my inexperience as a researcher. Technological limitations consist of the way in which data were collected from the athletes.

Limitations regarding the participants. In this particular study, the sample of 15 participants was nearly balanced by gender with 8 males and 7 females; however, the racial breakdown of the sample was predominantly white as only one individual was of African-American decent. Data arising from this study should not be taken as definitive for different populations. The schools that were used in this study were suburban schools with students from particular socioeconomic backgrounds. The findings in this study might not be the same in similar studies conducted in different locations or with students from different backgrounds.

There were definite areas in the study in which participants reported similarities of what they experienced, but there were also areas that could have been further explained with a larger sample particularly with negative behaviors. For example, some participants demonstrated optimism and focus even in the face of negative coaching behaviors. In a larger study, more results may be found regarding the various effects of negative coaching behaviors.

Although I did not originally see this in the design of the study, there also exists the possibility that specific sports have a more significant impact on participants. We know that certain sports are viewed differently in the community. For instance, football and boys basketball are perceived differently by the public as compared to swimming or softball. The traditional sports get more media coverage and are seen as more popular on high school campuses. In addition, particular communities may place more emphasis on certain areas of physical, intellectual, or sport development.

There are also differences in certain sports. In high schools, we traditionally see team sports such as football, basketball, and softball played next to individual sports such as golf, track and field, and swimming. What role if any do the differences in sport selection have on the athletes? In this study, the athletes came from both individual and team backgrounds and but no specific information regarding this question could be answered definitively.

Research limitations. Most of the research limitations emerge from my being a novice researcher. Though I completed pilot interviews with three participants and refined the interview questions accordingly, in retrospect it is clear that I still missed opportunities to probe for more information from the participants. This may be partially related to technological limitations described later. Regardless, there were missed opportunities to gain clarity which would have created more meaningful data. Additional studies should be done with a variety of high school students to see how their experiences compare to the students in this study.

Technological limitations. I used GoogleVoice to capture the phone audio recordings. It allowed me to capture entire conversations digitally for easier playback and transcription; however, there was an unforeseen limitation that did not appear in the pilot interviews. In the midst of my third interview, I ran into unexpected significant delays between my asking

questions and hearing the answers. These delays sometimes created long uncomfortable silences to avoid two people speaking at the same time. When I finally recognized what the problem was, I was able to modify the remaining interviews by telling the participants of the potential delays. Even so, in some situations it seemed the participants did not ask clarifying questions for fear the delay would get longer. I tried to find creative ways to encourage their further reports, but I feel I missed opportunities to probe more effectively.

Recommendations for future research

Although this study elaborates on the perceived effects of high school athletics, it also brings light to areas that need additional study. This dissertation focused on 15 athletes who were recent high school graduates. The data collected gives us valuable information on how their past participation currently influences their lives; however, a longitudinal study may reveal if the benefits discovered, such as physical exercise habits, engagement of capacity for leadership, and ongoing relationships, remain through later years.

In the data itself, participants talked about the role their coaches played in their lives. One aspect of further research regards how participants view their coaches. Sam said his coaches carried nearly as much influence as his parents:

In my years of wrestling, my relationships with my coaches has been awesome. We still speak to this day. They basically are as much in my life as almost my parents are you know. I was with them almost every single day. . . If you get a good coach that looks at things [with care] about their athletes and not just up on the scoreboard, what the scoreboard looks like but really takes a personal interest in their athlete that makes a huge difference.

Sam speaks of how important the coaches are to his current life. The coaches of athletes wield tremendous influence. They do spend focused amounts of daily time with them for a period of the three month season, but these relationships between participant and coach could also be explored in much greater depth.

Further exploration may also occur with different participants in different school settings. This focused study on students from three suburban high schools; however, additional studies could be expanded to include more, and more diverse, students. Schools with different socioeconomic settings may also reveal important results in discovering the impact of high school athletic participation.

As stated earlier in the dissertation, the theoretical framework which grounds this study derives from Marsh & Shavelson's (1985) self-concept theory; however, Susan Harter (1982) also did extensive research in the field of youth and how they create their identity. She developed an instrument, "The perceived self-competence scale," which I was unaware until the conclusion of this study:

The primary goal, then, was to devise an instrument which (a) provided a profile of the child's perceived competence in the cognitive, social, and physical domains; (b) tapped the child's sense of general self-worth; (c) revealed a sound factor structure indicating that these dimensions were psychologically meaningful; and (d) minimized the influence of social desirability response tendencies." (Harter, 1982, p.89)

Although I did not have access to this instrument in this study, using such an instrument in future research may reveal other ways that athletic participation affects our youth today.

In addition, the sample criteria in this study focused on successful varsity athletes; however, data could be gathered from other athletes who did not compete at a varsity level or

stopped athletic participation while still in high school. These participants might highlight different benefits and drawbacks they faced in athletic participation that were not identified in this study.

Recommendation to the field of educational leadership

Athletics is a key component of high school that gives schools identity (Coleman, 1960). It can be a vessel to promote character education including the Six Pillars of Character as proposed and widely adopted nationwide by the Josephson Institute (Josephson, 1998). This study adds to the field of educational leadership by suggesting how self-concept can be developed through participation. The participants found that they learned time management skills and became better academic students. They developed self-confidence and found ways to become leaders. Such findings may also empower students to find success academically. If educational leadership concerns itself with empowering individuals, athletic participation becomes part of this conversation by demonstrating how students experience aspects of development they may not encounter in daily academic curriculum. This study brings forth some potential outcomes of athletic participation that educational leaders can be better aware of so they can better lead their schools.

With the data provided in this dissertation, there still exists a further call for study of high school athletics, specifically to study their effectiveness. Do all athletics programs bestow memorable experiences that advance self-concept? Do these program instill morality in different settings and what are the key elements that can be manipulated to increase the likelihood of academic and social success? These are just a few areas that can add to the findings presented in this dissertation.

Personal reflections

Conducting empirical research has been a challenge that has been very illuminating. There are many intrinsic rewards in conducting a study that contributes to current educational theory and practice. For example, I feel a sense of pride at having contributed to ongoing work that is important to the lives of students; to listening to their voices to make my practice better. In my day to day activities, I share my findings with those who work with high school students so they can better understand how they influence our young people today and continue to advocate for their voices to be heard.

I also discovered how much more demanding the dissertation process was—in terms of dedication and precision— than I could have anticipated. Fundamentally, I have changed in that I now work to see things from a variety of a perspectives to gain better understanding. In looking at different perspectives, I also have found value in sharing these different outlooks with others. With my move toward greater transparency, I am able to gather more support from those around me. For example, I uncovered many facets that needed to be understood, taking me in research directions that I could not have imagined. During this work, I shared many of my ideas with not only my dissertation committee, but my colleagues as well which gave me more opportunities to share and clarify my ideas.

Professionally as an athletic director, this experience has made me lead differently. I am more attuned to some of the needs in my profession. I evaluate coaches differently. I work with them to create educational athletic environments that not only allow students to maintain healthy lifestyles, but also develop character. I am also a stronger advocate of athletic programs. I acknowledge the weaknesses I am aware of, but also recognize that athletic programs can empower students to make positive change in their lives.

Many friends and colleagues I speak with talk about how I've come to the end of my journey; ironically, I feel my work is just beginning. The door of conducting empirical research is now open and I look forward to seeing where it leads.

Summary

Throughout the nation, students crowd onto our school campuses. All are mandated to attend. Some attend because they have not yet found purpose; they may not be aware of social mobility, social justice, and the ways in which education can open a variety of career pathways. Others find school as a place that instills dreams of advancing their social status, creates drive to attain advancement to better achieve economic mobility, and even promotes pathways to academic or athletic advancement. This dissertation does not provide all the answers or motivations to what students find while in the hallways of the American high school, but it does seek to clarify one part of the high school experience, athletic participation.

This dissertation is an exploratory, descriptive study. The research questions explored: how athletes described their high school experience and how their athletic experience still affects them in their daily lives. This study gave voice to 15 student athletes and insight into what parts of the athletic experience they found influential and valuable.

Participants reported a number of perceived benefits due to their athletic participation. They found models of behavior in their teammates and coaches. They credited athletics as having helped them develop positive relationships with their peers and currently practice healthy exercise habits. It was during their athletic seasons that some found confidence to voice their opinions and take on roles of leadership. They also learned troubling lessons about how they would not replicate some negative behaviors they experienced. Whether they had an experience

that was profoundly negative or positive, they completed their athletic seasons and learned about themselves and others.

Although parts of high school athletics has been studied over the past century, very little qualitative studies have emerged and there is an absence of actual participant voice in empirical literature. What current research does support are numerous studies touting benefits of learning adult behaviors (Shields et al., 2007), serving as academic pathways to success (Eide & Ronan, 2001), and even adopting long term healthy lifestyles (Findlay & Bowker, 2007). There is even a growing body of research that examines how athletics may be a way to create higher self-esteem (Slutzky & Simpkins, 2009) that can connect to self-concept (Shavelson, 1976).

What we also know is that the role of the coach cannot be underestimated. As the adult leaders of athletic activities, these adults serve as role models who shape the high school experience and can affect the destiny of participants in a way that can affect how participants view their experience (Shields et al, 2007; Lee et al., 2008; Eitzen & Sage, 2008; Feltz et al., 1999). They are the individuals who the participants most look for guidance and can even carry more influence than some parents taking the role of second family leaders.

This is not to say that all athletic experiences are positive. Like many experiences, high school athletics has benefits and drawbacks. What resonates within them is that despite the drawbacks, athletes overwhelmingly saw their experiences as positive and integral to their high school experience. Since this is a dissertation that reveals the voice of athletic participants, it is appropriate that Sam left this testimonial at the end of his interview in regards to athletics programs:

These programs are what keep kids out of trouble. They build your basic foundations for being a good person. It taught me respect, loyalty, dedication, perseverance and all the

qualities a person should have. . . . I don't know what the outcome of my generation would be [without it] but hopefully they won't let it go.

It is my hope that this research is not the end, but a beginning point to future studies that will continue to inform parents, community, and educational leaders about athletic programs; to reveal how to make athletic programs better and to demystify them so that their value, both positive and negative, can be made transparent to future generations.

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Appendix – Interview Questions

Interview Questions:

- 1) Tell me about your educational background.
- 2) How did you get to where you are today?
- 3) Why did you go out for sports and what sports did you participate in?
- 4) What was it like when you first became a varsity player?
- 5) Do you think you have changed? Did athletics have a role in the change?
- 6) When you made a sports team did you notice a change in yourself? In others?
- 7) Did you find anything beneficial or detrimental about being part of high school athletics?
- 8) Did you learn anything that helped you through participating in athletics?
- 9) Do you think all students should participate in athletics? Why or why not?
- 10) Has athletics had an impact on you since leaving high school?
- 11) If you heard that high school athletics were going to be cancelled tomorrow, what would be your response? Do you think others would lose something? Do you think they would gain anything?
- 12) Were home contests different from visitor contests? Did you do anything differently?
- 13) Is there anything else you would like to add?