“We’re Hoping it Pays Off in the End”: Middle-Class Parents’ Perceptions of Youth Football

Laurel Whalen, Wayne State University
Nathan McCaughtry, Wayne State University
Erin Centcio, University of Hawaii at Manoa
Jeffrey Martin, Wayne State University
Albert Bimper, Colorado State University

Socio-Cultural - Community (Amateur Sport)  virtual asynchronous
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)  Session: Youth Sport I
Abstract 2020-226

Background:
Football is one of the most popular sports in the United States, despite a high risk of injury associated with the game. Mainstream media and scholarly literature have paid significant attention to the neurodegenerative disease chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) in former professional football players, which has prompted widespread concern about the safety of football down through all levels of competition. Medical experts have warned that youth under the age of 18 should not participate in tackle football (Findler, 2015; Omalu, 2017); however, children between the ages of six and 13 still comprise 70 percent of more than five million participants in the United States (USA Football, 2018). Participation numbers in youth football have steadily declined over the last decade, especially for children from upper and middle-class households. This study aimed to understand why middle-class parents promoted football for their children, despite the known risks, by examining parental attitudes regarding youth football participation and their perceptions of the safety of the game.

Methods:
After obtaining IRB approvals and written consent, 32 youth football parents from five teams in middle- to upper-middle class suburban neighborhoods were interviewed and observed over the course of a year. Each of the parents completed demographic profiles, were observed twice in a football setting, and participated in individual, hour-long interviews using Bevan’s (2014) semi-structured phenomenological approach.

Analysis/Results:
Data were initially considered using open coding, constant comparison, and analytic induction, and trustworthiness strategies included member checking, triangulation, and peer debriefing. The data, once sorted into themes, was then analyzed using the framework of Bourdieu’s theories of habitus, capital, and field and Lareau’s (2003) theory of concerted cultivation to consider class-based implications of suburban youth football participation. Three predominant themes emerged to explain how middle-class parents negotiated the decision to allow tackle football, despite their considerable access to information suggesting the risks: a) football cultivated skills that parents perceived to be valuable for the future, b) it was an outward proxy to suggest they were “good parents” in relation to their peers, and c) their promotion of a hyper-masculine activity was a rejection of a softening American male culture.

Conclusions:
More than other socioeconomic classes, the middle-class, according to both Bourdieu (1984) and Lareau (2003), is especially conscious of reinforcing a class habitus that establishes and advances their social and economic position. A shrinking American middle-class has left parents anxious about the future and more intent on curating a childhood that appropriately develops the minds, bodies, and cultural skills of their children. In this way, parents used youth football to promote the development of psychosocial traits that established and reinforced values relevant to their middle-class habitus and that would prove useful in adulthood. Specifically, parents perceived football as a way to foster the toughness required for a competitive professional future. Although the potential risks of football participation certainly played into parents’ considerations, their child-centered lives made it difficult to say ‘no’ to an activity that was socially desirable for children and parents alike in the suburban landscape.