The Influence of High School Athletic Participation in Developing Lifelong Healthy Habits

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Participation in youth sports continues to decline with the majority of youth dropping out of sport by high school (Merkel, 2013). As organized sport has traditionally been an avenue for developing healthy habits, there are concerns the lack of continual sport participation may negatively impact the health of individuals as they transition into adulthood. This is particularly a concern with rising health-care costs associated with physical inactivity as well as the inability of individuals to develop positive self-perceptions of social and emotional wellness. These societal issues indicate there is a need to understand the influence sport participation may have on an individual’s health throughout the lifespan. The purpose of this study was to investigate if sustained participation in sports through high school athletics influences physical activity and wellness later in life.

An online survey was developed utilizing Godin’s (2011) Leisure Time Exercise Questionnaire for gauging physical activity (mild, moderate, and strenuous) as well as the physical, emotional, and social wellness questions from the Perceived Wellness Survey (Adams, Bezner, Garner, & Woodruff, 1998). The survey was completed by 564 college alumni (69.1% female). Physical activity levels and perceived wellness scores were analyzed using high school athletic participation as the independent variable to compare athletes and non-athletes later in life (59.2% HS athletes). Participants were also stratified for comparison into the three adult life stages (young, middle and late).

An ANOVA indicated significant differences between groups in all areas. The greatest findings came from non-athletes in young adulthood, which had significantly negative differences in emotional wellness (p<.001), physical wellness (p<.01), and total wellness (p<.001) when compared to their counterpart athletes in the same life stage. Additionally, athletes in middle adulthood demonstrated significant differences in total wellness (p<.05) when compared to non-athletes in the same life stage. Regarding physical activity, athletes in young adulthood showed significant differences in strenuous physical activity (p<.01) when compared to their non-athlete counterparts. Finally, athletes in late adulthood showed significant differences in moderate physical activity (p<.01) when compared to non-athletes in late adulthood.

These findings provide strong evidence that high school athletic participation may help individuals develop healthy habits that are carried into adulthood. As high school athletics is often limited to the select few that make the team, there is a need for additional sport opportunities for all high school students. Community sport providers have a great opportunity to help fill this void by offering additional competitive sport programs that target high school students. A major challenge for community sport providers will be creating a similar structure to high school athletics. Therefore, collaboration with state high school athletic associations and school administrators should be explored to develop policies and strategies that provide additional athletic opportunities for adolescents, specifically in terms of facility access, equipment, and administrative support. These recommendations, if implemented, could have a significant impact on improving physical activity and enhancing perceived wellness for individuals throughout the lifespan, while decreasing health related diseases in society that are associated with physical inactivity and poor perceptions of wellness.