Sports Motivation: Three Generations of College Athletes

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Abstract
The type of motivation that drives an athlete’s performance may have long-term impacts on their overall enjoyment and satisfaction of their sport. The purpose of this study was to interview former collegiate athletes representing three different generations in order to acquire information on how participating in college sports has affected their desires to participate in their sport over the course of their lives. Participants in the study included represented three different generations, chosen based upon their age and participation in college sports. A qualitative interview was conducted to determine the types of motivation that have affected their sport participation throughout their lives. Results suggest that participation in college sports may alter an athlete’s motivation.

Introduction
To be motivated means to be moved to do something (Ryan & Deci, 2000). There are numerous reasons why athletes are motivated to participate in sports, for example staying in shape, learning new skills or improving their skills (Vallerand & Losier, 1999). However, other athletes find themselves entrapped by social constraints and feelings of obligations to others such as their parents, coaches and teammates (Raedeke, 1997). Motivation can be viewed as both the level of motivation the athlete shows and the type of motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The type of motivation is either intrinsic, for enjoyment or extrinsic, for reward. Intrinsic motivation is doing an activity for enjoyment and satisfaction rather than for some external reward (Ryan & Deci, 2000). For example, an
athlete that is intrinsically motivated would play sports for their personal enjoyment without regard to any external rewards. Extrinsic motivation is doing an activity in order to gain a reward (Ryan & Deci, 2000). For example, an athlete that is extrinsically motivated would play sports for external rewards such as scholarship, social status or parental approval.

It is important that coaches and other athletic professionals, whom are responsible for the physical and mental preparation of athletes, recognize what motivates their athletes in order to provide them support for attaining their goals while keeping the sport fun, to ensure personal enjoyment and satisfaction in sport participation. This article consists of interviews with three athletes, each representing a different generation, with a comparison of what motivates their participation in sports. The purpose of these interviews is to identify some of the factors that may influence the motivation of sport participation in college athletes.

**Historical Trends**

When a person feels energized or activated to accomplish a task he or she is considered to be motivated, whereby, a person that does not feel inspired to accomplish a task is labeled unmotivated (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In addition to the level of motivation, athletes may be motivated out of two different types of motivation, intrinsic and extrinsic (Vallerand & Losier, 1999). Athletes that are intrinsically motivated participate in their sport in order to experience pleasure and satisfaction that is inherent in the activity. Athletes that are extrinsically motivated may participate for tangible benefits such as scholarships and trophies or they may participate for social reasons such as recognition from their parents (R. J. Vallerand, 1997).

The self-determination theory (Edward L. Deci & Ryan, 1985) states that there are various types of extrinsic motivation. Athletes may grudgingly participate in rigorous trainings for purely external rewards such as maintaining their scholarship. However, other athletes may show up for the same practices with a willing attitude because they have internalized the extrinsic goal and recognize that the work will result in valuable outcomes such as perceptions of self-worth or future sports endorsements. According to the self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) there is a continuum of internalization in which an athlete can take in a regulation or value and transform it into a self-endorsed value. The internalization continuum ranges from an athlete’s unwillingness to participate to passive compliance, to active commitment. As the athlete further internalizes the value, the athlete may exhibit greater persistence, more positive self-perceptions and better quality of engagement.

The self-determination theory further states that an individual’s perception of their autonomy, competence and relatedness will impact their motivation (Vallerand & Losier, 1999). Events that negatively affect an athlete’s perception of autonomy, competence and relatedness such as training schedules that do not allow time to socialize with friends or negative criticisms from parents and coaches will likely undermine the athlete’s motivation.

Additionally, direct competition has been shown to undermine intrinsic motivation (Vansteenkiste & Deci, 2003). Furthermore, studies show that when tangible monetary rewards are offered, there will likely be a very strong decline of intrinsic motivation (E. L. Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999).

**Methods**

**Participants**

All participants for this study were selected based on known involvement in collegiate sports and to meet the following age requirements; Respondent #1 age 16-22, Respondent #2 age 32-50 and Respondent #3 over the age of 58. IRB approval was acquired prior to any data collection.
**Questionnaire**

The following questionnaire is qualitative and the interviewers were given the freedom to follow answers with additional questions when further clarification was needed. Interviewers were also allowed to skip questions if they felt that the respondent had elaborated enough on a previous answer to provide the needed data.

- Demographics questions – age, origin, time as a college athlete
- What are your top 3 leisure activities?
- How much time do you spend your time enjoying leisure each week?
- What experiences or background in your life led you to choosing these types of leisure activities?
- Did your experience as a college athlete affect your choice in leisure activities? Has your attitude about leisure changed since your participation in college sports?
- Do you have any constraints enjoying your leisure activities?
- How do you overcome your constraints?
- Do you like competitive sports as leisure activities? Why or Why not?
- How do you feel after doing your leisure activities (Is it different with competitive sports than other leisure activities)?
- Do you think your competitive sports as leisure activities can affect your life satisfaction positively or negatively? Why?
- Do you think you will ever stop participating in competitive sports for leisure activities? Why?

**Procedures**

The same three interviewers conducted each interview and all interviews were recorded, transcribed and condensed down to data that was relevant to the study. Interviews were held at the convenience of each respondent; Respondent #1 interviewed in a neutral conference room, Respondent #2 interviewed outside prior to coaching his team, and Respondent #3 interviewed in the respondent’s office.

**Results**

**Interview #1**

Respondent #1 is a 19-year-old college athlete that plays on her university team. When she was 4 years of age, she would watch her dad, brother and cousins play sports and she desired to play with them. Motivated by the desire to feel connected to significant others (Ryan & Deci, 2000), she began playing her sport and considered it fun and great way to spend time with her family. She began playing in matches when she was 8 years old and at first thought the competitions were a lot of fun. During this time she was intrinsically motivated as she participated in the sport for the pleasure and satisfaction that occurred when she attained her personal goals (Vallerand & Losier, 1999). However, she began to get better and the more she won games the more serious her sport became up until the point that she described it as her profession.

During Respondent #1’s childhood, she describes her sport as an activity that provided a lot of intrinsic motivation, she stated that she loved playing and said, “When I was young, I would pray for a sunny day so that I could play.” However, as she got older and she perceived her sport as her profession, she said, “I would pray for rainy days so I would not have to play.” She stated that she had mixed feelings because she wanted to spend time with her friends but her sports schedule was getting in the way. In Respondent #1’s case, she viewed her sports schedule as a constraint to her social life, providing her little autonomy thereby undermining her motivation (Vallerand & Losier, 1999). At this point in her life her motivation shifted from that of intrinsic, enjoyment, to that of extrinsic motivation feeling entrapped and pressured to play.
Now as a collegiate athlete, her attitude towards her sport continues to be constrained and it seems to be affecting both her leisure pursuits and her sport commitment. When asked about her leisure pursuits other than her collegiate sport, she expressed that her sport generally leaves her exhausted and she spends her free time lying on her bed, watching TV, relaxing and reading, additionally, she feels stressed due to the pressure her coach places on her to perform well. She also indicates that her sport feels like her job and if it were not for her scholarship, she would not be playing, this feeling of her sport becoming her job is a common occurrence when intrinsic motivation becomes undermined by extrinsic rewards (Deci & Ryan, 1991) such as scholarships. In fact, after college is completed she would like to quit playing for a while and would not be consider playing in any competitive sports.

**Interview #2**

Respondent #2 is a 33-year-old collegiate coach, who during his time as a college student participated on his college team as scholarship athlete. He began playing his sport at 10 years of age because his coach convinced him to come to practice and try playing the sport. At first, he enjoyed the one on one interaction with his coach but as he got involved in high school sports, he began to enjoy the competitions. The motivational progression in his young age is important to note, as it is common for children to participate in an activity motivated by the desire to feel connected to a significant other (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This initial desire to participate for the approval of others can then lead to the child internalizing the activity and choosing to play for goal oriented reasons.

As a college athlete, Respondent #2 stated that he did not consider his sport to be his leisure; instead, he viewed it as his job because he was on scholarship, which required lengthy practices and difficult trainings. The constraints of being a scholarship athlete did not take away his desire to play as he indicated there were many days that he would enjoy playing especially when he was competing. During this point in Respondent #2’s life, he apparently seems to be extrinsically motivated much of the time as playing is mandatory and a requirement of his scholarship (Deci & Ryan, 1991) but he also indicates that whenever he had free time he would spend it practicing. This willingness to be persistent in his training even when it is not mandatory could be explained by the extrinsic rewards becoming internalized and thereby becoming self-determined goals (Ryan, 1995). Deci & Ryan (2000) further stated that, with increasing internalization comes greater persistence and a more positive experience for the participant.

For nearly a year after college, Respondent #2 stopped playing his sport competitively and would only occasionally play for fun. He now coaches his sport and it continues to have an effect on his leisure behavior as indicated in his statement, “Sometimes because of the physical demands of coaching and the long hours, I don’t want to spend as much time being active.” This lack of freedom with his sport is similar to that of Respondent #1’s participation in her sport for purely extrinsic purposes and her feelings of entrapment due to social constraints (Raedeke, 1997).

**Interview #3**

Respondent #3 is a 64-year-old professor, who during his time in college participated as an athlete on his school’s team and has been playing his sport his entire life. He does not remember exactly when he decided to play but attributed that he started playing because his mother was such an avid fan of the game and his three brothers all enjoyed playing the sport. The significance of others such as parents or coaches behavior can have a major effect of children’s intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000) as
Respondent #3’s family had a positive impact on his enjoyment of the sport. His love of the sport continued during high school as he enjoyed the competition, skill development and demonstration of skill competency. He indicates a high level of intrinsic motivation, and describes his sport experience as satisfying, which should fulfill both his needs for competence and autonomy as supported by Ryan & Deci (2000).

While in college he joined the university team, the school was not a division I school and it did not offer its athletes scholarships. He remembers the workouts and training took a lot of time and effort with practices beginning in early fall and not ending until late May or early June but he says he always loved playing. Athletes have a high degree of intrinsic motivation as a view of psychological perspective when they choose their sport freely; however, their intrinsic motivation can become undermined, if they feel pressured into competing or they are obliged to play (Vallerand & Losier, 1999). As a non-scholarship athlete, he never felt pressured to play and always felt that he played for the love of the game, which is supported by research showing that non-scholarship collegiate athletes have higher levels of intrinsic motivation than scholarship athletes (Ryan, 1977). As a young adult, he continued to play for the love of the game and played on a community league at which time he had an extremely competitive attitude.

After completing graduate school his wife and he decided to take a break from playing ball so they could focus on raising their two children. Once again, he continued to stay close to the sport through practicing with his children and volunteering as a coach for their teams. Iso-Ahola (1980) indicated that change is able to occur within activities. For instance, people that cannot pursue their sports because of obligations or lack of time may continue to stay involved in their sports as volunteer teachers or coaches. It is possible that he was more likely to be motivated extrinsically to participate in his sport because it led to a separable outcome, but since he still considered it fun to play, it seems that he was able to retain his intrinsic motivation.

As soon as his children grew up, he began playing his sport once again and currently is very active on a senior sports league. He says he still enjoys competition but he really enjoys having fun and participating in a healthy activity. Even though many other older adults lose their sports participation because of personal or social constraints, Respondent #3’s consistency in pursuing sports for intrinsic motivation over the course of his life may largely contribute to his continued participation in sports (Mannell & Kleiber, 1997). He jokes that his practices are not really practices because practicing might imply that he intends to get better but at this point in his life, he is not concerned with getting better he just plays for his enjoyment. Additionally, he adds that playing his sport is something that he has always done and he cannot imagine quitting as long as he has his health.

**Comparison of Three Cases**

The following table provides a comparison of the types of motivation that affected the respondents at different life stages (Table 1). During childhood, each respondent indicated that they began playing because of a connection with a significant other but soon began to play for their own personal satisfaction. During adolescence Respondent #1 began to feel the pressures of serious competition and lack of freedom it gave her to spend time with her friends, while Respondent #2 and Respondent #3 welcomed serious competition as it allowed them the opportunity to test their skills and achieve their internalized goals.

Respondent #1 and Respondent #2 were each on scholarship with their sport during
college and they indicated that due to the scholarship they felt like their sport had become their job and lost their sense of freedom in playing. However, they each internalized the situation differently. Respondent #1 seems to have little internalization and does not enjoy playing, while Respondent #2 seems to have internalized the goals, and still enjoyed competing. Respondent #3 was not a scholarship athlete and though he discussed the rigorous training schedules, he continued to play because he enjoyed the game. After college, Respondent #1 plans to quit competitive sports, Respondent #2 continues his sport as a coaching career but aside from coaching role would rather spend his time doing other activities and Respondent #3 has continued and is still playing his sport for his personal enjoyment.

Table 1.

Motivational Factors Indicated by Respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Childhood</th>
<th>Adol.</th>
<th>College</th>
<th>Post-College</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Resp. #1</strong></td>
<td>Connection</td>
<td>Serious competition</td>
<td>Scholarship lack of freedom, social constraints</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>to significant others, enjoyment of the game</td>
<td>feelings of entrapment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Resp. #2</strong></td>
<td>Connection</td>
<td>Internalized goal oriented play, enjoyment of competition</td>
<td>Scholarship lack of freedom, social constraints, internalized goal oriented play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>to significant others, enjoyment of the game</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Resp. #3</strong></td>
<td>Connection</td>
<td>Internalized goal oriented play, enjoyment of competition</td>
<td>Non-scholarship autonomy goal oriented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>to significant others, enjoyment of the game</td>
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</tbody>
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Discussion

All of the respondents discussed that they began playing their sports as a way to connect to another person, in Respondent #1 and Respondent #3’s case they had close family members that enjoyed their sport while Respondent #2 indicated that his coach showed an interest in him personally and invited him to come play. Ryan and Deci (2000), state that many behaviors must initially be prompted and the primary reason people begin a behavior is to feel connected with a significant others. Once the respondents began playing they indicated that they played for intrinsic reasons such as pleasure and fun (Vallerand & Losier, 1999).

During adolescence, Respondent #2 and Respondent #3 continued to enjoy competitions, skill development and demonstrations of competency, which fits the definition of intrinsic motivation that individuals engage in behaviors to feel competent and self-determining (Pedersen, 2002). Respondent #1 indicated that she felt very constrained as her sport became more serious and she was unable to spend time with her friends. This lack of freedom that occurs when winning is emphasized, negatively affects the athletes perception of autonomy and undermines their intrinsic motivation (Vallerand & Losier, 1999).

During college Respondent #1 and Respondent #2 both indicated that being scholarship athletes took away a lot of autonomy and created a lot of social constraints. Both Respondent #1 and #2 were extrinsically motivated but they internalized the goals of the sport differently as Respondent #1 has no desire to play other than meeting her requirements for scholarship, whereas Respondent #2 still enjoyed the competitions. These different outlooks can be explained by the self-determination theory which states that there is a continuum of internalization in which an individual internalizes regulations and transforms it into their own goals (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The range of the continuum goes
from unwillingness to participate to active personal commitment. Though it cannot be stated exactly where on the continuum the respondents are, it is easy to see that Respondent #2 has internalized his goals to a greater degree which should provide greater persistence and better engagement in his sport (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

After college, Respondent #1 plans to quit competitive sports and this drop in motivation is common to people who have participated for extrinsic reasons, once the extrinsic rewards are removed (Pedersen, 2002). Respondent #2 has changed roles in his sport as he is now a coach but he continues to internalize his goals and enjoys competition. Respondent #3 continues to play for the intrinsic reasons of pleasure and fun (Vallerand & Losier, 1999).

Conclusion

Throughout all three interviews, it is evident that various factors motivate these athletes depending on their age and life roles. All three of the respondents were intrinsically motivated to play their sports during their childhood expressing that they played for fun and enjoyment. Additionally, Respondent #3 indicated a high degree of intrinsic motivation in playing his sport simply for enjoyment throughout his life.

During their adolescence years, Respondents #1 and #2 became extrinsically motivated largely because of their participation in competitions and Respondent #1 indicated that she was further motivated to win in order to receive her parent’s approval. As Respondents #1 and #2 entered college, they both viewed their sports as a job and felt obligated to practice and compete as a requirement of their scholarships. In contrast, Respondent #3 never saw his sport as a job and always viewed his sport as fun and enjoyable. Both #1 and #2 indicated that upon completion of college their desire to play their sport was very low and neither wanted to participate competitively. Respondent #2 continues to be extrinsically motivated as he has started coaching his sport and chooses to spend his free time focusing on his family rather than sports.

Most sport professionals desire to help their students or clientele achieve their personal and team goals but far too often many professionals get caught up in winning, hosting the next event or preparing for the next game and forget to pay attention to underlying reasons that motivate their athletes to participate. When the individual’s motivation is overlooked, the athlete often begins to feel pressured or entrapped by their sport, possibly causing a decrease in the quality of their athletic performance or even dropping out of sports altogether.

Sport professionals should learn to recognize and understand the different motivating factors that influence players’ enjoyment and commitment to their sports. By understanding the athletes’ motivation, the sport professional will be better equipped to offer the right kind of support for helping athletes to accomplish their goals without undermining the athletes’ intrinsic motivation or feelings of autonomy. By ensuring athletes have a high degree of intrinsic motivation or self-determination; the athletes will be more likely to enjoy the benefits of participation in sports and recreational activities that will in turn offer them a lifetime of increased health and well-being.
**References**


