

# The Social Determinants of Athletes' Health: Health and High Performance?

Parissa Safai (York University), Jean Harvey (University of Ottawa)  
and Philip G. White (McMaster University)



## The Production of High Performance

- We know that the structure of the Canadian sport system frames the intensive, work-like and often health-compromising production/nature of high performance (HP) sport but...
- How do the material conditions of being an athlete influence health and wellbeing?



## Social Determinants of Health (SDOH)

- The economic and social factors that influence the health of individuals and communities as a whole
  - “Health...originates to some degree in the character of socioeconomic relations”
- The quantity and quality of a variety of resources that are made available to members of a society

3



## Toronto Charter for a Healthy Canada

- Childhood development
- Education
- Employment/working conditions
- Food security
- Healthcare services
- Housing shortages
- Income and its distribution
- Social exclusion
- Social safety nets
- Unemployment
- Marginalized populations
  - (Women; Aboriginal peoples; Visible minorities; Immigrants; Persons with a disability)
- Stress\*

4



## The Healthfulness of Sport?

- Mixed methods
  - Qualitative: exploring athletes' lived experiences in relation to SDOH and the production of HP sport
  - Quantitative: studying incidence of compromised health
    - Survey informed by Toronto Charter
    - Distributed electronically and by hard copy
    - Limitations

5



## Survey Questionnaire Data

- 56.8% women, 43.2% men
- Age: 20.5% < 20 years, 48.4% between ages 20-29, 21% between 30-39, 10.1% > 40 years
- 61.6% single or never married
- 86.2% lived in urban communities
- 42.3% of respondents spent 20 to 29 hours per week on their sport
- When asked if they are currently working, 83.1% of respondents said yes
  - When asked why they were working, 71.1% said because of insufficient sport funding
  - Majority of our respondents (61.9%) did not receive AAP
- Almost 41.6% of respondents estimated that their annual personal income (pre-tax) was less than \$20,000 yet 42.7% estimated that their total household income was more than \$80,000

6



## Themes from Qualitative Data

1. Health is relative and participation in HP sport remains health-compromising
2. Continued (often heavy) reliance on support system for material support support and the weight of participation in HP sport on the health of the supporters
3. Markedly middle- to upper-class background of athletes and their families
  - Stability in income and employment
  - Inaccessibility of HP sport (“uni-racial”, “monolithic”)
  - Middle-class ethos

7



## The Relativity of Health

“No, I was pretty healthy this year.”

- Dizziness
- Low blood pressure
- Eye infections
- Chest infections and colds
- “Stressed out” and emotional work
- Litany of chronic/overuse injuries
- “A full week focused on the body.”
- “If it’s just a matter of arthritis, s/he will just keep doing [sport].”

8



## Support Matters

“A lot of [my teammates] still live with their parents and so they have their parents’ help. I think their parents are a bit more well off than me, so yes, they’re going to have situations where they will have money issues but I think that their parents, because they’re more well off, can help support them. Whereas because I am living on my own and my parents aren’t as well off [pause] then it’s more on me.”

9



## Support Matters (2)

“Debt is creeping up on me....I don’t even know if I’ll get [financial help] next year, we’ll see how that goes [pause] but I think I should [pause] I hope. You know, it’s all doubting and hoping and last minute decisions and things like that. Nothing’s for certain in this world, nothing’s secure. You can never feel secure, that’s what kind of sucks. I think it’s more of a security issue. If you feel more secure and you’re not worried about other things, like financial issues, the health doesn’t go. But if you’re worrying about that, then the stress will definitely increase, for sure. And if you’re working two jobs, you definitely have higher stress and you get sick because that’s what happened to me.”

10



## The Health of the Family

“Last summer, when [my son] got injured and there was a remote possibility that he would be out of his sport, the two of them [son and husband] went downhill mentally. I noticed it. It was not pleasant around here. Neither one of them were prone to bad moods and they were both...[indicates downward with her thumb]. It was depressing around here last August and September. I think the health of the family is greater being involved in speed skating than it would be if we were not involved. I really do think that.”

11



## Stable and “Still Stretched”

“Considering that we are both well-educated adults with great jobs, we are stretched to the absolute maximum...I think sheltering, clothing, feeding, training costs, coaching costs, ice costs, whatever your sport, is totally impacted by whether your parents can afford it or not when you’re at this age. I think it precludes kids who have less money. It doesn’t matter about funding.”

12



## Parents' Voices

“We arrange our lives around her sport.”

“We do it happily because she loves it.”

“We can afford the time.”

“We do it happily but when you are a one-income family, a single parent...it's pretty hard. Usually, one-income families don't do competitive sport.”

“You won't see recent immigrants. They don't have the finances and they don't have the information.”

13



## Middle-Class Investment in Sport

“Sport gives them a focus that promotes self-esteem, their sense of health, respect for their body and working with others.”

- Translation of physical capital into other forms of capital
- Spent approx. \$30,000 - \$35,000 last year for three kids' participation in sports
  - “Part of our budgeting.”
  - “A choice we have decided to undertake.”
  - “We have the resources.”

14



## Social Class as Most Significant Barrier

“The increasing inequity in the distribution of wealth among Canadians...may constitute the single most important barrier to access to sport and physical activity, and may undermine most of the proposed initiatives to overcome other barriers. When this is combined with over 20 years of the decline of public provision, increasing privatization and user fees, and the decline of physical education and school sport opportunities, social class constitutes the most significant barrier.” (Donnelly & Kidd, 2003, p. 31)

15



## Inequities in SDOH: Barriers to Participation in Sport

Revisiting health of athletes as issue of class and context

- Layers of exclusion
  - Class position may be most powerful determinant but operates at the intersection of other determinants
- Sport and health context in Canada
  - Heightened support for athletes for 2010 and in advance of 2012 Games does not address material conditions of their lives nor does it address barriers to participation more broadly
  - Increasing levels of income inequality and decreasing public budgets for sport/recreation
  - Greater awareness around SDOH but downstream HC continues to dominate public/political health dialogue

16