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Understanding Deselection in Competitive Female Youth Sport

Project Summary

Deselection (or being “cut”) is the elimination of an athlete from a competitive sport team based on the decisions of a coach. Given the competitive sport structure in Canada, it is inevitable that many athletes will be deselected every year. However, little is known about how coaches deal with deselection process, and how athletes and their parents cope with being cut. The overall purpose of this research was to gain a better understanding of deselection in competitive female youth sport, specifically at the provincial level. This purpose was achieved by conducting three related studies, each focused on a different aspect of deselection. The first study examined coaches’ decision-making within the deselection process. The second study examined how athletes and their parents communally coped with deselection. The third study explored positive growth following deselection. Overall, this project identified strategies used by coaches to carry-out the deselection process, and identified ways in which athletes and their parents coped with deselection, including some coping strategies that contributed to positive growth. By generating more knowledge about how coaches, athletes, and parents manage and cope with deselection, we may be able to help reduce the potential harms associated with this extremely challenging feature of youth sport. These findings provide empirical research to better inform deselection practices in youth sport in Canada.

Research methods

This research used a qualitative research approach. In Study 1, interpretive description (Thorne, 2008) was used to examine coaches’ decision-making within the deselection process. Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with 22 head coaches (16 male, 6 female, M age = 41.9 years, SD = 11.6 years, range = 26-71 years) of female adolescent provincial level soccer (n=5), basketball (n=6), volleyball (n=6), and ice hockey (n=5) teams. A member-checking email protocol was completed by 19 coaches. In Study 2, the descriptive phenomenological approach (Giorgi, 2009) was used to explore how athletes and their parents coped with deselection from provincial sport teams. Fourteen female adolescent athletes (M age = 15.0 years; SD = 1.4) and 14 of their parents (5 fathers, 9 mothers; M age = 45.2 years; SD = 5.4) participated in individual semi-structured interviews. Participants were deselected from provincial soccer (n=4), basketball (n=5), volleyball (n=2), and ice hockey (n=3) teams. A member-checking email protocol was completed by 22 participants (11 athlete-parent dyads). In Study 3, interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith et al., 2009) was used to examine female athletes’ experiences of growth following deselection. Data was collected through two individual semi-structured interviews with each participant; a main interview and a member-checking interview. Participants were 18 females (Mage = 22.73 years, SD = 1.35) who had competed in competitive youth sport as adolescents and were deselected from a provincial soccer (n=9), ice hockey (n=5), or volleyball (n=1) team between the ages of 14 and 18 years.

Research results

In Study 1, results revealed deselection was a process that involved four phases: pre try-out meeting, evaluation and decision-making, communication of deselection, and post deselection reflections. During the pre-tryout meeting coaches explained logistics, selection criteria, and expectations for athletes and parents. The evaluation and decision-making phase included coaches evaluating players, documenting their decisions, and dealing with certainty and uncertainty. When faced with uncertainty coaches relied on intuition. Communication of deselection involved informing players of their decision, providing feedback, and dealing with parents. During post-deselection reflection coaches reflected on the procedures they used throughout the deselection process and the consequences of their decisions for on-going athlete development. By establishing distinct phases of the deselection process we were able to isolate specific details of coaches' responsibilities, concerns, and decisions at different times.

In Study 2, the results showed that participants consistently appraised deselection from a shared perspective (i.e., athletes and parents viewed deselection as 'our problem') and the responsibility for coping with deselection changed as time progressed. Initially, parents protected their daughters from the negative emotions arising from deselection (an 'our problem, my responsibility' orientation). Athletes and parents then engaged in cooperative actions (rationalization and positive reframing to manage their reactions to the stressor (an 'our problem, our responsibility' orientation). Finally, athletes and parents engaged in individual coping strategies. Athletes and parents engaged in a broader social network, while athletes also focused on their club team and increased their training efforts. This reflected an 'our problem, my responsibility' orientation but with athletes taking more responsibility for coping.

In Study 3, results highlighted some of the potential long-term implications of deselection in youth sport. Deselection was remembered as a negative and often devastating experience that caused participants to question their ability and identity as an athlete. However, positive growth occurred for athletes through experiencing humility, re-establishing sport as their main priority, social support, gaining perspective, and being generally optimistic about future sport opportunities. Through these processes athletes developed compassion for others, gained motivation and perseverance, and learned how to cope with setbacks in other aspects of their lives.

A limitation of the research was the sample sizes. While appropriate given the purpose of this research, they were small and relatively homogenous. As a consequence, the results do not readily generalize to other youth sport populations (e.g., males, athletes at different levels of competition, or younger athletes). All interviews were retrospective, and it may be possible to gain more precise information about the deselection process and processes of coping and growth by using longitudinal research designs (e.g., multiple interviews). Lastly, self-selection bias may be present in Study 2 and 3 because participants were asked to contact the lead researcher. It is possible that only those who thought they had coped with deselection or experienced positive growth volunteered to participate.

Policy implications

This research on deselection in youth sport has several implications for youth sport participation and policy in Canada.

1. A highly structured deselection process is useful for coaches. It is important to hold pre try-out meetings with parents and athletes to explain selection criteria and expectations. Coaches should involve additional coaches as evaluators in order to provide a sense of fairness but also provide support for coaches' decisions.

2. Coaches are encouraged to communicate deselection decisions in private face-to-face settings and provide feedback to athletes. Given the emotional state of many athletes following deselection, providing written feedback to athletes is recommended.
 3. Sport organizations may want to consider having procedures in place to protect coaches when it comes to parent interactions to deal with parents once deselection has been communicated.
 4. Parents play a critical role in helping their children cope with deselection. Sport organizations and coaches could consider educating parents about the role they can play in supporting their children following deselection. This would be an important shift in the way deselection is approached by sport organizations/coaches because previous research shows they are most concerned about dealing with parents' complaints (which coaches themselves report as a stressor) rather than explaining ways in which parents can help their children cope.
 5. During pre-try-out meetings, coaches could explain that parents can play a crucial role in supporting their children post-deselection, and suggest coping strategies for parents (e.g., console first, communicate, positive reframing, engage a broader social network) and athletes (e.g., club team focus, increased effort) that may lead to positive growth over time.
 6. Deselection is an important area of training for coaches because it is something they have to go through each and every season, and when done poorly, can have negative consequences for athletes and even deter them from continued sport participation.. Given that athlete development and continued participation is the focus in youth sport, there are deselection strategies coaches can use that actually contribute to athlete development, but only if coaches are educated on how to implement them appropriately. Deselection is also a stressful experience for coaches, so proper training can alleviate some of the stress associated with this often disagreeable process.
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Next steps

Future research should evaluate the effectiveness of different types of deselection protocols (e.g., those used by different sports) and athlete, parent, and coach outcomes in order to establish 'best practices' for deselection in youth sport. Specifically, research that would lead to tangible knowledge products created for coach education in Canada would help ensure coaches are trained in carrying out deselection. There is also a potential for developing a deselection protocol for coaches that could be implemented across Canada.

Key stakeholders and benefits

- Provincial and National Sport Organizations
- Coaching Association of Canada
- Provincial Coaching Associations
- Canadian Sport Psychology Association
- Coach and Parent education programs
- Youth Sport Academies
- PYDsportNET