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The meaning of competition for young athletes according to Artistic Gymnastics’ coaches

Myrian Nunomura¹ & Yoshinori Okade²

¹ University of Sao Paulo, Brazil ² University of Tsukuba, Japan

Objective of the study

The purpose of this field-based study is to analyze Artistic Gymnastics (AG) coaches’ point of view concerning the role of competition for young athletes.

Approach and method

Drew (1998) stated some intrinsic and extrinsic values of sport. Intrinsic ones are those directly related to the challenge and the satisfaction of being evaluated. Extrinsic ones are the consequence of participating in competitions such as building character, developing courage, commitment, discipline, and others.

Competitions are inherent to sport (Marques, 2004) and it may play an essential role in participants’ life. According to the literature, competitions for children and youth should be viewed as part of the sport participation process and not its purpose. Competitions should be adapted to them, being less selective and exclusive as possible, rewarding all participants, and having particular rules (Bompa, 2000; Marques, 2004). Sporting competition can be a comparative situation (De Rose Jr, 2002b; Marques, 2004) with different parameters like oneself, others, or an existing standard. Particularly for children and youth, depending on the approach of sporting competition, it may have positive or negative effect as they are emotionally immature and some aspects like self-concept and self-confidence are still under development. But all of this is a matter of how competition is taking into account and has been organized for them. Some authors are reluctant to sporting competition for children and youth arguing it is a kind of abuse and rights violation (Villela & Shigunov, 2003).

Some others (Bompa, 2000; Villela & Shigunov, 2003; Marques, 2004) argue that the overemphasis on winning and outcomes may lead to skip some stages of the sport process and to early specialization. Added to the expectation of parents and coaches, children may be directed to one sport and probably will be engaged in an adults’ model training.

One involved in sport may enjoy evaluating and/or comparing performance to oneself or others. Sporting competition can be healthy for children and youth when it is well designed and planned for them and when developmental and educational aspects are highlighted. But what coaches think about the role of competition for children and youth?

Nowadays, sporting competition for children and youth is an issue of much concern due to the early specialization and its consequences on participants. AG may be even more criticized as usually gymnasts start competing earlier than other sports.

Forty-six experienced coaches who are coaching young athletes (female and male, 11.16±2.26 yrs) entering intensive AG programs were interviewed. Athletes have been attending official events (national and state) and some have achieved international recognition. Based on Bardin’s content analysis (2001), responses were submitted to a peer-assessment for categorization and analysis.

Results and Discussions

The majority of coaches place the importance of competition on the contribution to the general development of athletes, which is advocated by some authors (Douge, 1999; Bompa, 2000; Marques, 2003, 2004). Coaches recognize that the value of sport participation is more than achieving results and medals. Some also revealed effort to make participants conscious of the role of competition in sport and in their lives.

Most of coaches are sure that competition has close relation to motivation and athletes’ commitment to sport, regardless their skill level (Weinberg & Gould, 1999; Samulski, 2002; De Rose Jr, 2004). On the other hand, few coaches acknowledge the differences within children and youth in respect to rewards and that their expectations vary considerably over ages. Older children seem to be driven by performance improvement and the meaning of the experiences in sport (Singer, 1991; Weinberg & Gould, 1999; Samulski, 2002). Contrary, external rewards are more appreciated by the younger ones as their need of approval and recognition by their efforts and commitment, e.g. medals (Marques, 2003). It is important for coaches to have that in perspective. Otherwise some participants may feel disappointed and dissatisfied for not being rewarded and dropout is potential. In this regard, we could also connect dropout and lack of motivation that some coaches reported as a result of the difficulties of athletes when dealing with lost and unrecognized situations. Some coaches also referred to the counter-effect of competition when expectations are not achieved and the potential reason for dropout if not well coped with coaches and parents (Gill, 1986). Another remarkable finding is that some coaches try to have realistic approach to children concerning their potential, what they could expect, and how far institutions will support them.
The connection between competition and setting goals and objectives reported by some coaches has support of the literature (Duda, 1995), but it should not be seen as the purpose of the sport indeed, but a kind of self-evaluation (De Rose Jr., 2004), motivational strategy, and learning for life. Others values of competition reported for some coaches were: socialization, self-assessment, parameters for training program, and fun, which are advocated by Duda (1995), Weinberg and Gould (1999), and De Rose Jr (2002b).

Few coaches mentioned the improvement of social status throughout sport and the eventual financial interest of athletes and/or parents as reasons to participate in sport and competitions. But, no rarely, the fact may be seen in developing countries like Brazil.

Closing Thoughts

Competition is an important issue in children and youth sport participation as there are still controversies in objectives and actions concerning their development (Bompa, 2000; Marques, 2003, 2004). There will be negative effects of competitions on participants when outcomes are overemphasized, they are pressured and earlier involved into formal competition designed for adults, when coaches do not consider emotional dimensions and do not assist participants in this area.

An interesting remarking is to observe some coaches who have negative view of competition attending events frequently. We questioned how they deliver the meaning of competitions for their athletes, how much or what they expect from participating?

It is noteworthy finding coaches stressing that sporting competition will always be healthy and will play an essential role in life if athletes are very conscious of the reason for participation. But, in fact, how many coaches have we seen spending time making things clear in sport participation and can avoid the desire for outcomes?

Those findings clarify that coaches should be oriented in such a way to acknowledge athletes of the importance of competitions for their sport career and life. Usually coaches will feel pressure from institutions and/or parents, and even athletes will desire victories and medals. The challenge for coaches is to balance needs and interests, appropriateness, beliefs, and the real situation they may face. Working with the avoidable and unavoidable!

From the University end the challenge is to set up and delivery such content and strategies to assist coaches dealing with various dimensions of sporting competition which are beyond the organization of events. Assuming that competitions are part of sport participation, it is a fallacy to believe that coaches will have a natural ability in dealing with competitive matters. Some coaches have only their own sport program as a parameter and may replicate it believing it was adequate. None all aspects of competitions may be absolutely bad nor good. It is essential from the academic side to broaden the concept of sporting competition and differentiate each type according to the stage of participants’ life and interests.

Coaches should understand that not all participants have the same level of desire and expectation of sport participation and competition. The competition calendar for children and youth should allow plenty time for other activities and leisure. Knowledge of the developmental stages of life and differences among individuals will assist coaches to understand and deal with needs, interests, and limitations along the ages and to set up goals and strategies that better fit the participants.

Changes in the official rules, creation of categories to accommodate skill levels, and allowing time for participants’ adaptation to the demands of competition are some other coaches’ responsibilities. The more emphasis on fun, participation, development of social skills and others seem to be the desirable approach of competition for children and youth.

So, competitions should not be eliminated from children and youth sport participation, but some concerns and adaptations mentioned before are desirable. In such a developmental appropriateness view of competition, it can be legitimated as part of sport process.

Main References


