Examining Former Athletes’ Developmental Experiences in High School Sport

Kelsey Kendellen1 and Martin Camiré1

Abstract
The purpose of this study was to examine former athletes’ perspectives on their developmental experiences in high school sport. Retrospective interviews were conducted with 14 former high school athletes (seven females, seven males) between 18 and 28 years of age (\(M = 23.0, SD = 2.66\)). An inductive thematic analysis led to the identification of two main findings. First, it appears that different types of life skill experiences emanated from high school sport participation. Specifically, the participants believed that high school sport allowed them to (a) acquire new life skills or (b) practice and refine existing life skills. Second, the participants shared numerous examples of negative experiences, suggesting that the aggressive subcultures of some sports have permeated into high school sport. Overall, the findings provide a more nuanced and comprehensive picture of the varied developmental experiences that can ensue from high school sport participation.

Keywords
youth development, life skills, youth, sport, experiences

Examine former athletes’ perspectives on their developmental experiences in high school sport. Retrospective interviews were conducted with 14 former high school athletes (seven females, seven males) between 18 and 28 years of age (\(M = 23.0, SD = 2.66\)). An inductive thematic analysis led to the identification of two main findings. First, it appears that different types of life skill experiences emanated from high school sport participation. Specifically, the participants believed that high school sport allowed them to (a) acquire new life skills or (b) practice and refine existing life skills. Second, the participants shared numerous examples of negative experiences, suggesting that the aggressive subcultures of some sports have permeated into high school sport. Overall, the findings provide a more nuanced and comprehensive picture of the varied developmental experiences that can ensue from high school sport participation.

Keywords
youth development, life skills, youth, sport, experiences

1University of Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

Corresponding Author:
Kelsey Kendellen, School of Human Kinetics, University of Ottawa, 125 University Private, Montpetit 428, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1N 6N5. Email: kkend091@uottawa.ca

Creative Commons CC-BY: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/) which permits any use, reproduction and distribution of the work without further permission provided the original work is attributed as specified on the SAGE and Open Access pages (https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/open-access-at-sage).
student-athletes can learn life skills, in accordance with the educational missions of schools (Forneris, Camiré, & Trudel, 2012).

In the context of high school sport, previous qualitative research has documented the life skills that athletes believed they developed through high school sport participation. For instance, Camiré, Trudel, and Forneris (2009) explored the life skill development of high school athletes, and the findings indicated that most participants believed high school sport represented a context in which they developed social skills (e.g., ability to meet new people), in addition to enhancing psychological dispositions (e.g., confidence). Furthermore, Holt, Tink, Mandigo, and Fox (2008) conducted a case study of a male high school soccer team to examine if and how youth developed life skills through participation in sport. Results indicated that the coach did not deliberately teach life skills, but helped create an environment that provided opportunities for youth to demonstrate initiative and experience teamwork and leadership. Other studies have examined the perspectives of coaches who deliberately taught life skills (Camiré, Trudel, & Forneris, 2012; Gould, Collins, Lauer, & Chung, 2007; Trottier & Robitaille, 2014). The findings from these studies showed how coaches deliberately taught life skills by helping their athletes set goals, organizing team-building activities, providing opportunities to display skills, and modeling appropriate behavior. Quantitative studies have also been conducted to examine how high school sport participation can influence youth development. For example, Bruner, Boardley, and Côté (2014) illustrated how high school athletes who reported having ingroup affect (i.e., positive feelings associated with being a member of their team) frequently exhibited prosocial behaviors (e.g., positive feedback) toward their peers. Moreover, athletes involved in high school sport experienced developmental opportunities related to time management, emotional regulation, teamwork, social skills, and initiative (Gould & Carson, 2010; Wilkes & Côté, 2010).

Much of the scholarship on high school sport has explored the positive experiences of participation, and only a few studies were found that specifically touched on the negative experiences. For example, the findings from Camiré and Trudel (2010) indicated how high school athletes reported having been the victim, witness, or perpetrator of physical (e.g., intentionally hurting opponents during matches) and verbal aggression (e.g., trash talking). Dworkin and Larson (2006) conducted focus groups with students at a high school, and findings revealed how negative experiences in organized youth activities, including sport, occurred during interactions with peers (e.g., formation of cliques, poor cooperation, aversive peer behavior) and adult leaders (e.g., favoritism, unknowledgeable leaders, inappropriate adult behavior). Buford-May (2001) conducted an ethnographic study as the assistant coach of a boys’ basketball team at a predominately African American high school. In his coaching role, he observed how the athletes often violated the standards of sportsmanship (e.g., giving opponents cheap shots) in efforts to win. Furthermore, it was shown how highly competitive atmospheres existed during games, exposing the athletes on a constant basis to discrimination, racism, and verbal/physical aggression. Some student-athletes mentioned how negative interactions with peers in particular led them to quit their high school sport teams.

Overall, the literature reviewed indicates that youth can benefit in numerous ways from taking part in high school sport, but negative experiences can also occur and undesirably affect their development. In a recent review on youth development in North American high school sport, Camiré (2014) noted a dearth of empirical research examining the negative experiences of high school sport. It appears that the strongly held belief in many Western countries that sport contributes to positive youth development is being perpetuated by sport researchers, which Coakley (2011) referred to as sport evangelists, who may feel less inclined to examine both the positive and negative experiences associated with participation in sport. An important step in addressing this situation is to conduct research examining all developmental facets associated with sport participation. This is an especially important area of inquiry given that the best approaches to youth development are those that combine the promotion of positive life skills with the reduction of negative attitudes and behaviors (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004; Hilliard et al., 2014). As such, the purpose of this study was to examine former athletes’ perspectives on their developmental experiences in high school sport. Two research questions guided this study:

**Research Question 1:** What are the positive experiences (life skills) associated with former athletes’ high school sport participation?

**Research Question 2:** What are the negative experiences associated with former athletes’ high school sport participation?

These two research questions allowed for the positive experiences reported by the participants to be weighted equally against the negatives.

**Method**

The principles of the constructivist paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), which posit that reality is relative and knowledge is co-constructed, guided this study. In line with constructivism, a qualitative methodology (Merriam, 2009) was employed and allowed for insights into how the participants interpreted their lived experiences within the context of high school sport.

**Context**

Participants were recruited from high schools in the province of Ontario, Canada. The Ontario Federation of School Athletic Associations (OFSAA) governs high school sport in...
Ontario and communicates through its mission statement the educational value of sport, which is expected to help students develop the life skills needed to become responsible citizens (OFSAA, 2013). High school sport is considered a developmental level context, defined by a formal competitive structure and the selection of students based on their physical skill level (Gilbert & Trudel, 2006). The high school sport context affords male and female students between the ages of 14 and 18 with opportunities to participate in a variety of team and individual sports. High school sports are usually practiced after school hours, and students compete in organized interscholastic leagues that lead to annual regional/provincial championships. Students can practice multiple sports throughout the school year as the average length for a sport season is between 2 and 3 months (Lacroix, Camiré, & Trudel, 2008). Typically, teachers volunteer their time to coach high school sports, but when there is a lack of teacher volunteers, coaches from the community are recruited to fill vacant positions.

Participants
A total of 14 former high school athletes (seven females, seven males) between 18 and 28 years of age (M = 23.0, SD = 2.66) were purposefully recruited (Patton, 2015). The sample was also one of convenience given that the researchers had the opportunity to recruit participants in two communities within two different regions of Ontario, with the participants being recruited from the Eastern (n = 9) and Southwest (n = 5) regions of the province. Efforts were aimed at selecting former athletes who had some time to look back and reflect upon their high school sport experiences. Studies have shown how a temporal separation from one’s high school sport participation helped former athletes process and reflect on their past sporting experiences (Gould & Carson, 2010; Voelker, Gould, & Crawford, 2011). However, past research has highlighted several challenges associated with retrospective methods, including memory, impression management, and attributional bias (Snelgrove & Havitz, 2010). In attempts to minimize such challenges, a decision was made to restrict the sample to those within a 10-year recall period. Furthermore, in line with Ericsson and Simon (1980), a series of probes (e.g., Do you have an example of a situation in high school sport that helped you acquire this skill? How did your high school coach respond in this situation?) were used to elicit rich contextual information and help the participants frame their responses within the precise boundaries of the study (i.e., high school sport).

Participants needed to satisfy the following eligibility criteria to take part in this study: They should have (a) attended a public and/or private high school in Ontario and (b) completed a minimum of one full season of an OFSAA-sanctioned high school sport as an athlete. The participants indicated having played 12 sports at the high school level: volleyball (n = 10), soccer (n = 8), track and field (n = 8), basketball (n = 6), badminton (n = 5), hockey (n = 5), cross-country (n = 4), rowing (n = 2), rugby (n = 3), swimming (n = 3), wrestling (n = 1), and football (n = 1). The participants practiced between one and six sports (M = 4, SD = 1.57) during their high school career. The participants played between 1 and 5 years (M = 2.91, SD = 1.15) of high school sport. Nine participants practiced high school sport and club sport concurrently. At the time of this study, eight participants were enrolled at post-secondary institutions, pursing a college diploma (n = 2), bachelor’s degree (n = 2), master’s degree (n = 3), or post-graduate diploma (n = 1). Six participants had completed their bachelor’s degree and were working full-time (e.g., government relations analyst, customer service representative, strength and conditioning coach).

Procedure
Approval to conduct the study was granted by the Office of Research Ethics and Integrity at the researchers’ university. A recruitment letter containing the first author’s contact information was distributed at community recreational facilities (e.g., canoe clubs, soccer fields) and workplaces (e.g., school administrative office, public sector offices) in both recruitment regions. Interested participants contacted the first author directly via email to schedule an interview. Before the interviews, participants were informed of their rights confidentially, provided written consent, and completed a one-page demographic questionnaire. Prior to the data collection, the first author participated in a bracketing interview (Rolls & Relf, 2006) to better understand how past high school sport experiences may influence knowledge construction in the current study. Three pilot interviews were conducted with former high school athletes to refine the interview guide (e.g., order of the questions) and assess the usefulness of certain probes.

Data Collection
Data were collected via individual semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted in person by the first author and lasted between 42 to 79 min (M = 62:44, SD = 0:41). Interviews were audio-recorded and conducted at a time and location (e.g., home, workplace, university office) that was selected by and was convenient for the participant. In an effort to reduce social desirability, the researcher thoroughly explained to the participants that there were no right or wrong answers and that their personal perspective on their experiences in high school sport was desired. Furthermore, to ensure the relevance of the examples provided, the participants were asked to make efforts to discuss their developmental experiences that occurred in the context of high school sport (as opposed to club/community sport).

The interview guide contained three sections. In the first section, the participants provided details concerning their experiences with coaches (e.g., Can you describe what you
believed the priorities of your high school coach were? Would you say that you had a positive relationship with your coaches, a negative relationship, or a little bit of both?\). The second section was used to gain an understanding of the positive and negative experiences associated with the participants’ high school sport participation. In this section, there were closed-ended questions specifically for the positive (e.g., Do you believe your high school sport participation allowed you to develop leadership skills? Do you believe your high school participation helped you learn the skills necessary to become a responsible person?) and negative (e.g., Do you believe there were times when your experience in high school sport was stressful? During your high school sport participation, did you ever face issues with a teammate?) experiences. The participants who answered yes were then asked a series of open-ended probes (e.g., Can you provide an example? Can you tell me a little bit more about that?). The participants who answered no proceeded to the next question. The rationale for asking a closed-ended question followed by a series of open-ended probes was to refrain from assuming that the participants were indeed exposed to particular positive (e.g., developed a life skill) or negative (e.g., adopted a negative behavior) experiences. Questions in the third section were used to provide the participants with an opportunity to discuss additional high school sport experiences that they deemed to be of relevance for this study (e.g., Is there anything else you would like to discuss about your high school sport experiences? If you could go back in time, is there anything you would change about your experience in high school sport?). The interview guide is available from the first author upon request.

**Data Analysis**

All interviews were transcribed verbatim, yielding 261 single-spaced pages of data. Transcripts were emailed to participants for them to review. Thirteen of the 14 participants responded to this email and were in agreement that the findings were an accurate representation of their views. One participant did not respond. Transcripts were uploaded in the qualitative data analysis software NVivo (Version 10), which was used to manage the data (Creswell, 2013). An inductive thematic analysis was conducted by the first author following the six-step analytical procedures described by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, the transcripts were thoroughly read by the first author to become familiar with the data. Second, meaning units in the transcripts were organized, thereby generating initial codes (e.g., social skills) using NVivo. Third, similar codes were grouped to form the basis of latent themes (e.g., perceived life skill acquisition). The fourth step of analysis consisted of reviewing the themes to ensure internal homogeneity (i.e., data within themes share common features) and external heterogeneity (i.e., themes are distinct from one another). Fifth, the themes were refined and given specific names and definitions, with particular emphasis placed on ensuring that the overall story of the data (in line with the research questions) was told. The final step consisted of producing the report, whereby vivid quotes were selected to represent the participants’ developmental experiences in high school sport. To increase the trustworthiness of the findings, peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was used. Specifically, in Step 4 of the analysis, the first author and second author engaged in extensive discussions to determine the internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity of the themes that were created. The second author questioned the appropriateness of several of the themes created, and changes were made until consensus was achieved. The peer also worked with the first author in Step 6 of the analysis, helping select the participant quotes that best represented the participants’ developmental experiences in the context of high school sport.

**Findings**

The findings are organized into two sections: (a) the participants’ positive experiences (life skills) associated with their high school sport participation and (b) the participants’ views on the negative experiences associated with their high school sport participation. Pseudonyms are used to protect the participants’ identity.

**Positive Experiences**

The participants indicated how they believed high school sport represented a context that allowed them to experience a wide range of positive life skills. From the analysis, two types of positive life skill experiences appeared to result from the participants’ involvement in high school sport. Specifically, the participants provided examples of how they believed that high school sport allowed them to (a) acquire new life skills or (b) practice and refine existing life skills. The first experience is defined as the perceived acquisition of new life skills through high school sport that the participants did not believe they possessed prior to their participation in high school sport. The second experience represents a situation in which life skills were believed to be previously acquired in other life domains, but that high school sport signified a context in which those life skills could be practiced and refined.

**Perceived life skill acquisition.** The majority of participants believed that they acquired many new life skills through their experiences in high school sport. First, several participants believed that they acquired the skills needed to be effective leaders. Brittany explained that when she was voted captain of her high school soccer team, she had to learn how to be a leader and not always have a leader to fall back on . . . I definitely learned how to step up and how to take on the challenge of being the voice of all the players.
Similarly, when discussing his experience of being the youngest member of his high school volleyball team’s starting line-up, Christopher said,

I was put in that leadership role very young and I think it was a huge lesson I learned in high school sport, that in that environment, you’re able to become a leader and teach people things regardless of age.

Second, some participants felt that they acquired important social skills. For example, John shared how being on a high school football team enhanced his ability to develop relationships:

I started making friends with people and figured out how the dynamics work; how people become friends and how people get along playing together . . . I was pretty good friends with a lot of people at the end.

Third, several participants believed that it was challenging to meet the demands of both school and sport and as a result, these experiences enabled them to acquire time-management skills. John stated how he felt he acquired time-management skills in high school sport and recognized the value of using an agenda to help manage his time. Particularly, high school sport itself did not teach John how to use an agenda, but sport acted as an essential instigator whereby to be able to efficiently manage both school and sport demands, he needed to find tools (i.e., agenda) to do so:

I was involved in so many sports and so many activities, I think at first I struggled with that, but then I definitely learned to improve that. I’d never used an agenda before, and then I started using an agenda, and that saved me.

Perceived life skill practice. The participants indicated how they believed that they had already acquired some life skills in other domains prior to their involvement in high school sport. Therefore, for those existing life skills, high school sport represented a setting that allowed for practice and refinement. First, David discussed how he had acquired coping skills through other experiences, but believed that he practiced how to deal with stressful situations when playing on his high school’s cross-country team. He stated, “Yes, there were very stressful moments and before an OFSAA [high school provincial championship] race, my legs were shaking, but I think I learned the coping skills outside of school and I practiced them in school.” Second, Christopher discussed how he learned to be responsible in his family environment, but practiced this skill often in high school sport:

I think already coming into sport, I was very responsible, but I think sport allowed for another venue for me to exercise that. I’m the oldest of two brothers and in my culture, a lot of responsibility is put on the eldest, so I already had that. When I was put in those leadership positions [in high school sport], it was a different way to express that.

Third, many participants mentioned how they had developed a good work ethic prior to entering high school. From their perspective, high school sport was viewed as a setting that provided opportunities for them to practice and refine their work ethic. Kelly mentioned how she practiced putting forth her best effort in high school sport on a regular basis:

Because of the work ethic and the commitment that I gave it [high school sport] all the time, the other girls saw me as something they wanted to be like . . . I think it [high school sport] showcased what I already did . . . because that’s how I always was in general.

Negative Experiences

Although the participants believed that they acquired and/or practiced life skills through their high school sport participation, they also discussed examples of negative experiences, which hindered positive youth development.

Aggression. The participants involved in contact sports described how during high school sports they commonly witnessed aggressive behaviors, which Weinberg and Gould (2003) defined as behavior directed toward intentionally harming another person. Two main reasons were highlighted. First, several participants believed that a lack of emotional control skills often resulted in aggressive behavior. David described how he witnessed an assistant coach on his ice hockey team physically confront a player, after the coach in question discovered that the player had attempted to prank him by putting ketchup in his shoes: “He [coach] had a death stare, he wanted to kill someone, and that’s when the coach pushed him [player], and pretty much everybody backed out, and then a few 11th and 12th graders went back in and separated them.” Second, findings suggest that senior ice hockey players often behaved in an aggressive manner to showcase their power and influence over younger players. Dylan revealed how the senior players on his ice hockey team demonstrated their aggression by initiating the younger players:

We had rookie beats . . . the rookies [we] would all stay in the same room and the veterans would come in and beat the crap out of us because we weren’t playing much, so it didn’t matter if we were hurt.

This same participant ventured to explain why he believed this subculture of aggression existed in many male contact sports:

I don’t think that a physical way is the best way to get that message across, but when you are a kid in a highly masculine setting where everybody is a pumped up young man and the
testosterone’s flowing, that seemed the best way to get their message across. (Dylan)

Former male ice hockey players reported most examples of aggression, but this subculture also existed, as one rugby player Meghan noted, in other high school sports and with female athletes:

In rugby, everyone wanted to kill each other . . . . when I thought about tackling someone in rugby, I was like, “I’m going to put this person in the ground.” Sometimes when I tackled girls, they would try to kick you in the face with their cleats on the way up, so in that case I marked them and I was like, “I will get you next time.”

Stress. Many participants attributed their negative psychological experiences mainly to the stress associated with balancing school and sport demands. For example, Joseph explained how stress levels increased during exam time:

I got really tired and stressed when I had exams, so then I wasn’t playing well and then my coach got mad at me because I wasn’t playing well. I think definitely that was when I was the most stressed.

On this particular matter, Meghan commented,

I would say around exam time, that was probably the most stressful because I was trying to study for exams, but then I also had sports . . . there wasn’t really a lot of time to focus that effort towards school.

Some participants felt that they experienced high levels of stress in high school sport because they were afraid to make mistakes. Natalie described how her volleyball coach’s behaviors affected her psychologically and increased her stress level during play:

He would be very mad if you made a mistake and so I’d get really stressed just getting on the court, so it would make me make mistakes . . . . if you made a mistake, he would take you right off . . . before every game, I’d feel like I was going to puke . . . I’d say stress is an understatement.

Interactions with coaches. The participants expressed how many of their negative experiences in high school sport were the result of inappropriate social interactions with coaches. Participants specified that two behaviors prevented them from socializing appropriately with their coach: (a) coach favoritism and (b) coach superiority. Connor claimed that favoritism existed on his football team because his coach refused to discipline the best players, even when they engaged in aggressive behaviors:

The better players who were real jerks used to always start problems with other players and get into fights, but there was no punishment for them . . . . the best players could essentially get away with whatever they wanted and still play. (p. 14)

Two participants provided examples of instances when they perceived that their coach acted in a condescending manner: “He [basketball coach] would constantly talk down to me and make me feel inferior to him and he did not focus at all on developing my skills” (Erin) and “My volleyball coach didn’t seem like a guy with open arms. If you went to him with a question or anything, he made you feel dumb sometimes, just by being all-knowing and intimidating” (Tyler).

Prioritizing sport. A few participants believed that their high school sport participation negatively influenced their academic performance because they attributed more importance to sport. Dylan felt that he prioritized high school sport over academics because of the increased social status he associated with sport participation: “I put most of my energies towards sports because you would get recognized by your peers more for your sporting achievements than if you were the smartest kid in class.” Moreover, Amanda believed that she prioritized high school sport over academics because it offered a more enjoyable experience: “I always got more pleasure and enjoyment from doing sport-related things rather than being stuck in a classroom.” Looking back, many participants regretted prioritizing sport over academics as Brittany noted, “I regret putting my school in the back seat. I definitely regret that. I did okay, it wasn’t that bad, but I definitely could have spent more time and effort in my schooling.”

Discussion

Past research has demonstrated how sport can be a context suitable for the development of life skills (Camiré et al., 2012; Fraser-Thomas & Côté, 2009). One of the contributions of the current study resides in extending the life skill literature by demonstrating how high school sport can provide a context where (a) new life skills can be acquired and (b) existing life skills can be practiced and refined. More specifically, participants in the current study discussed how they believed they acquired new life skills through their experiences in high school sport (e.g., time management), while others believed that they acquired life skills prior to their involvement in high school (e.g., learned responsibility in family environment). The findings from the current study are consistent with previous research which has shown how athletes do not enter the sporting context as tabula rasa and has suggested the importance of considering youth’s existing level of development (Gould & Carson, 2008). For instance, Camiré et al. (2012) found that high school coaches believed they effectively facilitated life skill development by personalizing their coaching philosophies according to the unique needs of their athletes (e.g., existing life skills). Taken together, these findings illustrate how participation in sport is a complex process that does not lead to uniform experiences for all involved. In addition, the current findings provide a more nuanced depiction of developmental experiences by
showing how life skills can manifest themselves differently (i.e., acquisition or practice) based on the existing skills that youth bring into the sporting context. Nonetheless, more research is needed in this area to examine how life skill experiences manifest themselves in different contexts (e.g., other countries, club sport) and age groups (e.g., university athletes, young children).

The findings of this study have practical implications for coaches who are seeking to tailor their coaching approaches to better suit the needs of their athletes as it relates to life skills. In practical terms, coaches should deliberately organize activities outside of the sporting context, such as holding regular individual meetings with athletes, to stay informed of events occurring in their lives (Camiré, Fomeris, Trudel, & Bernard, 2011). Another initiative coaches should consider is maintaining open communication lines with their athletes’ teachers. Coaches can gain valuable information from teachers in terms of how their athletes are exhibiting life skills (e.g., time management, leadership) or a lack thereof (e.g., lack of emotional control) in the classroom. Coaches can use this information to include in their coaching plan strategies that provide athletes with opportunities to (a) practice their existing life skills or (b) acquire new life skills when deficiencies have been identified. By working together and sharing information, coaches and teachers are in preferred positions to positively influence the development of youth.

Another aim of the current study was to examine in greater detail the potential negative experiences associated with high school sport participation. Coakley (2011) has argued that researchers must be more critical in terms of how they view sport by refraining from assuming that “sport is essentially good and that its goodness is automatically experienced by those who participate in it” (p. 309). Despite the fact that sports are practiced in high schools precisely because they are believed to lead to positive experiences for youth, the findings of the current study revealed how negative experiences are nonetheless a reality. Specifically, our findings are in line with previous research demonstrating how negative experiences can occur during participation in sport when coaches exhibit inappropriate behaviors, such as favoritism (Dworkin & Larson, 2006; Fraser-Thomas & Côté, 2009). In addition, the findings illustrated how some of the participants’ negative experiences were directly connected to the coach who either promoted (e.g., pushed a player after an attempted prank) and/or permitted (e.g., distributed playing time in unfair ways) the experience. These negative coach influences further justify the need for training for high school coaches on how to effectively promote positive youth development and teach life skills. Given that formal (e.g., coach education courses) opportunities for coaches to learn about positive youth development and life skills are rare or nonexistent (Vella, Oades, & Crowe, 2013), school sport leaders should find ways to expose their coaches to non-formal (e.g., seminars) and informal (e.g., interactions with peer coaches) learning situations that have been shown to help coaches promote youth development through sport (Camiré, Trudel, & Forneris, 2014). Moving forward, a fundamental principle all high school coaches should be made aware of is the importance of integrating deliberately planned strategies into their coaching practice aimed at facilitating life skill development. Such strategies that have been shown to be effective include helping athletes learn how to set goals, building strong relationships, and using keywords to remind athletes of certain life skills (Camiré et al., 2012; Gould et al., 2007; Trottier & Robitaille, 2014).

One finding that is of cause for concern was the often vivid and graphic descriptions provided by the participants of aggressive behaviors occurring in high school sport, particularly in contact sports such as ice hockey. Previous research has explored the subculture of youth ice hockey (e.g., Fraser-Thomas et al., 2014), often evidenced by a lack of respect for opponents and a propensity for rule breaking. Our findings demonstrate that ice hockey’s often aggressive subculture exists not only in community clubs, but also appears to be prevalent in the high school sport context. If sports are practiced in high schools because they are believed to lead to positive experiences for student-athletes, then deliberate efforts from school sport leaders are needed to ensure that the aggressive subcultures of some contact sports do not permeate into the educational setting and reduce youth’s opportunities to experience positive life skills. One example of a deliberate effort to reduce the aggressive subculture in high school ice hockey is an annual tournament, which operates using a system whereby the results of matches are determined not only by scoring but also by a team’s discipline record during the game (Casselman High School, 2014). Such initiatives are in line with recommended approaches to positive youth development (Catalano et al., 2004; Hilliard et al., 2014) as they combine the promotion of positive life skills with the reduction of negative attitudes and behaviors. Perhaps this means that more rule changes are needed in certain sports to ensure that the developmental mandate of high school sport is being implemented during school sporting events.

Of note in the current study was the finding demonstrating how senior athletes used aggressive behaviors to showcase their power and influence over younger athletes. To mitigate the occurrence of such situations, coaches are encouraged to find ways to deliberately foster constructive relationships among senior and younger athletes. For example, coaches should consider creating peer-to-peer mentoring relationships, whereby senior athletes share some responsibility for the development and well-being of younger athletes. This recommendation is in line with the findings of Hoffmann and Loughead (2015), who found that peer-to-peer athlete mentoring in sport that focused on the professional and personal development of younger athletes was positively associated with their athletic satisfaction. Such mentoring can focus on one or many aspects (e.g., helping with academics, teaching sport skills, and dealing with personal issues) and when
implemented properly, senior athletes can gain a strong sense of satisfaction from transmitting their knowledge to younger athletes in addition to acquiring important leadership and organizational skills.

Taken together, the findings from the current study support Holt and Jones’s (2008) claim that numerous variables influence the nature of youth’s experiences in sport and that ultimately, developmental experiences may vary considerably for different participants, even if they take part in sport within the same context. By providing former athletes with time to thoroughly reflect on how their experiences in high school sport influenced their development, the current findings illustrate how positive (i.e., life skills) and negative experiences can occur at the same time within a single sporting context, such as high school sport. Sport represents an umbrella term for many different contexts of participation and as such, future research is needed to examine the subtleties of specific sporting contexts and how these subtleties influence the nature of the participants’ developmental experiences. Also, as we move forward, more research is needed to explore how negative experiences in sport affect athletes in their other life domains, such as home and school.

The findings from the current study must be considered in light of their limitations. First, the positive and negative experiences presented in this study represent the retrospective perspectives of former high school athletes aged 18 to 28. The participants’ perspectives may or may not be accurately reflecting their actual lived experiences or the current state of affairs in high school sport. Second, the data were collected in a single Canadian province, and the experiences reported by the participants may not be representative of high school athletes in other provinces or countries. Third, the former athletes recruited for this study had time to reflect on their high school sport experience but the gathered data might reflect memory bias, especially with the participants who were several years removed from high school sport.

**Conclusion**

Overall, the findings from this study illustrated that high school sport could be framed as a developmental context as participants provided insights into how they believed they acquired and/or practiced several life skills in this setting. These findings can help coaches recognize the importance of knowing who their athletes are to teach life skills that are relevant to their needs. Overall, it appears that high school sport can be a positive experience for youth, but given that negative experiences are indeed encountered by participants in this setting, deliberate efforts from coaches and school sport leaders are needed to improve this context and align it with the developmental mandate of high school sport.

**Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**Funding**

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article: This work was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada under Grant 766-2013-0856.

**References**

Bean, C. N., Fortier, M., Post, C., & Chima, K. (2014). Understanding how organized youth sport may be harming individual players within the family unit: A literature review. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 11*, 10226-10268. doi:10.3390/ijerph111010226

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*, 77-101. doi:10.1177/1938205605280177

Bruner, M. W., Boardley, I. D., & Côté, J. (2014). Social identity and prosocial and antisocial behavior in youth sport. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise, 15*, 56-64. doi:10.1016/j.psychsport.2013.09.003

Buford-May, R. A. (2001). The sticky situation of sportsmanship: Contexts and contradictions in sportsmanship among high school boys basketball players. *Journal of Sport & Social Issues, 25*, 372-389. doi:10.1177/0193723501254003

Camiré, M. (2014). Youth development in North American high school sport: Review and recommendations. *Quest, 66*, 495-511. doi:10.1080/00336297.2014.952448

Camiré, M., Forneris, T., Trudel, P., & Bernard, D. (2011). Strategies for helping coaches facilitate positive youth development through sport. *Journal of Sport Psychology in Action, 2*, 92-99. doi:10.1080/21520704.2011.584246

Camiré, M., & Trudel, P. (2010). High school athletes’ perspectives on character development through sport participation. *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy, 15*, 193-207. doi:10.1080/17408989090287917

Camiré, M., Trudel, P., & Forneris, T. (2009). High school athletes’ perspectives on support, communication, negotiation and life skill development. *Qualitative Research in Sport and Exercise, 1*, 72-88. doi:10.1080/19398440802673275

Camiré, M., Trudel, P., & Forneris, T. (2012). Coaching and transferring life skills: Philosophies and strategies used by model high school coaches. *The Sport Psychologist, 26*, 243-260.

Camiré, M., Trudel, P., & Forneris, T. (2014). Examining how model youth sport coaches learn to facilitate positive youth development. *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy, 19*, 1-17. doi:10.1080/17408989.2012.726975

Casselman High School. (2014). *Statuts et règlements* [Statutes and rules]. Retrieved from http://escasselman.com/franco/tournoi-franco-ontarien-hebergement/administration/constitution

Catalano, R. F., Berglund, M. L., Ryan, J. A. M., Lonczak, H. S., & Hawkins, J. D. (2004). Positive youth development in the United States: Research findings on evaluations of positive youth development programs. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 591*, 98-124. doi:10.1177/0002716203260102

Coakley, J. (2011). Youth sports: What counts as “positive development?” *Journal of Sport & Social Issues, 35*, 306-324. doi:10.1177/0193723511417311

Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
Danish, S. J., & Donohue, T. R. (1995). Understanding the media’s influence on development of antisocial and prosocial behavior. In R. L. Hampton, P. Jenkins, & T. P. Guillot (Eds.), Preventing violence in America (Vol. 4, pp. 133-155). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Danish, S. J., Forneris, T., Hodge, K., & Heke, I. (2004). Enhancing youth development through sport. World Leisure Journal, 46(3), 38-49. doi:10.1080/04419057.2004.9674365

Danish, S. J., Forneris, T., & Wallace, I. (2005). Sport-based life skills programming in the schools. Journal of Applied School Psychology, 21(2), 41-62. doi:10.1300/J370v21n02_04

Danish, S. J., Petitpas, A., & Hale, B. D. (1995). Psychological interventions: A life development model. In S. M. Murphy (Ed.), Sport psychology interventions (pp. 19-38). Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2011). Introduction: The discipline and practice of qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), The SAGE handbook of qualitative research (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Dworkin, J., & Larson, R. (2006). Adolescents’ negative experiences in organized youth activities. Journal of Youth Development, 1(3), 1-19.

Eime, R. M., Young, J. A., Harvey, J. T., Charity, M. J., & Payne, W. R. (2013). A systematic review of the psychological and social benefits of participation in sport for children and adolescents: Informing development of a conceptual model of health through sport. International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity, 10, Article 98. doi:10.1186/1479-5868-10-98

Ericsson, K. A., & Simon, H. A. (1980). Verbal reports as data. Psychological Review, 87, 215-251. doi:10.1037/0033-295X.87.3.215

Forneris, T., Camiré, M., & Trudel, P. (2012). The development of life skills and values in high school sport: Is there a gap between stakeholder’s expectations and perceived experiences? International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology, 10, 9-23. doi:10.1080/1612197X.2012.645128

Fraser-Thomas, J., & Côté, J. (2009). Understanding adolescents’ positive and negative developmental experiences in sport. The Sport Psychologist, 23, 3-23.

Fraser-Thomas, J., Côté, J., & Deakin, J. (2005). Youth sport programs: An avenue to foster positive youth development. Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy, 10, 19-40. doi:10.1080/1740998042000334890

Fraser-Thomas, J., Jeffery-Tosoni, S., & Baker, J. (2014). “I like that you can hit a guy and not really get in trouble”: Young ice hockey players experiences’ with body checking. International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology, 12, 121-133. doi:10.1080/1612197X.2013.837091

Gilbert, W. D., & Trudel, P. (2006). The coach as a reflective practitioner. In R. L. Jones (Ed.), The sports coach as educator: Re-conceptualising sports coaching (pp. 113-129). New York, NY: Routledge.

Gould, D., & Carson, S. (2008). Life skills development through sport: Current status and future directions. International Review of Sport and Exercise Psychology, 1, 58-78. doi:10.1080/17509840701834573

Gould, D., & Carson, S. (2010). The relationship between perceived coaching behaviors and developmental benefits of high school sports participation. Hellenic Journal of Psychology, 7, 298-314.

Gould, D., Collins, K., Lauer, L., & Chung, Y. (2007). Coaching life skills through football: A study of award winning high school coaches. Journal of Applied Sport Psychology, 19, 16-37. doi:10.1080/1041320060113786

Hilliard, L. J., Bowers, E. P., Greenman, K. N., Hershberg, R. M., Geldhof, G. J., Glickman, S. A., . . . Lerner, R. M. (2014). Beyond the deficit model: Bullying and trajectories of character virtues in adolescence. Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 43, 991-1003. doi:10.1007/s10964-014-0094-y

Hoffmann, M. D., & Loughead, T. M. (2015). Investigating athlete mentoring functions and their association with leadership behaviours and protégé satisfaction. International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology. Advance online publication. doi:10.1080/1612197X.2014.999348

Holt, N. L., & Jones, M. I. (2008). Future directions for positive youth development and sport research. In N. L. Holt (Ed.), Positive youth development through sport (pp. 122-132). London, England: Routledge.

Holt, N. L., Tamminen, K. A., Tink, L. N., & Black, D. E. (2009). An interpretative analysis of life skills associated with sport participation. Qualitative Research in Sport and Exercise, 1, 160-175. doi:10.1080/19398440902909017

Holt, N. L., Tink, L. N., Mandigo, J. L., & Fox, K. R. (2008). Do youth learn life skills through their involvement in high school sport? A case study. Canadian Journal of Education, 31, 281-304.

Janssen, I., & LeBlanc, A. G. (2010). Review systematic review of the health benefits of physical activity and fitness in school-aged children and youth. International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity, 7, Article 40. doi:10.1186/1479-5868-7-40

Jones, M. I., & Lavallee, D. (2009). Exploring the life skills needs of British adolescent athletes. Psychology of Sport and Exercise, 10, 159-167. doi:10.1016/j.pysrev.2008.06.005

Kwan, M., Bobko, S., Faulkner, G., Donnelly, P., & Cairney, J. (2014). Sport participation and alcohol and illicit drug use in adolescents and young adults: A systematic review of longitudinal studies. Addictive Behaviors, 39, 497-506. doi:10.1016/j.addbeh.2013.11.006

Lacroix, C., Camiré, M., & Trudel, P. (2008). High school coaches’ characteristics and their perspectives on the purpose of school sport participation. International Journal of Coaching Science, 2(2), 23-42.

Larson, R. W., Hansen, D. M., & Moneta, G. (2006). Differing program characteristics and their perspectives on the purpose of school sport participation. International Journal of Coaching Science, 2(2), 23-42.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). Naturalistic inquiry. Newbury Park, CA: SAGE.

Mahoney, J. L., Larson, R. W., Eccles, J. S., & Lord, H. (2005). Organized activities as developmental contexts for children and adolescents. In J. L. Mahoney, R. W. Larson, & J. S. Eccles (Eds.), Organized activities as contexts of development: Extracurricular activities, after-school and community programs (pp. 3-22). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Merriam, S. B. (2009). Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
Ontario Federation of School Athletic Associations. (2013). About OFSAA. Retrieved from http://www.ofsaa.on.ca/about
Patton, M. Q. (2015). Qualitative research and evaluation methods (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
Rolls, L., & Relf, M. (2006). Bracketing interviews: Addressing methodological challenges in qualitative interviewing in bereavement and palliative care. Mortality, 11, 286-305. doi:10.1080/13576270600774893
School Sport Canada. (2013). About SSC. Available from http://www.schoolsport.ca
Slutzky, C. B., & Simpkins, S. D. (2009). The link between children’s sport participation and self-esteem: Exploring the mediating role of sport self-concept. Psychology of Sport and Exercise, 10, 381-389. doi:10.1016/j.psychsport.2008.09.006
Snelgrove, R., & Havitz, M. E. (2010). Looking back in time: The pitfalls and potential of retrospective methods in leisure studies. Leisure Sciences, 32, 337-351. doi:10.1080/01490400.2010.488199
Sonderlund, A. L., O’Brien, K., Kremer, P., Rowland, B., De Groot, F., Staiger, P., . . . Miller, P. G. (2014). The association between sports participation, alcohol use and aggression and violence: A systematic review. Journal of Science and Medicine in Sport, 17, 2-7. doi:10.1016/j.jsams.2013.03.011
Trottier, C., & Robitaille, S. (2014). Fostering life skills development in high school and community sport: A comparative analysis of the coach’s role. The Sport Psychologist, 28, 10-21.
Vella, S., Oades, L., & Crowe, T. (2013). A pilot test of transformational leadership training for sports coaches: Impact on the developmental experiences of adolescent athletes. International Journal of Sports Science & Coaching, 8, 513-530. doi:10.1260/1747-9541.8.3.513
Voelker, D. K., Gould, D., & Crawford, M. J. (2011). Understanding the experience of high school sport captains. The Sport Psychologist, 25, 47-66.
Weinberg, R., & Gould, D. (2003). Foundations of sport and exercise psychology (3rd ed.). Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
Wilkes, S., & Côté, J. (2010). The developmental experiences of adolescent females in structured basketball programs. PHENex, 2, 1-21.

Author Biographies

Kelsey Kendellen is a PhD student at the University of Ottawa’s School of Human Kinetics in Ottawa, Canada. Her research interests lie in the domain of positive youth development and, more specifically, understanding the development and transfer of life skills through sport. She has been involved in the development and evaluation of youth sport programs designed to deliberately facilitate the development and transference of various life skills.

Martin Camiré is an assistant professor at the University of Ottawa’s School of Human Kinetics in Ottawa, Canada. His areas of interest lie in sport psychology and sport pedagogy. Through his research, he is interested in examining how positive youth development can be facilitated in the context of sport and how coaches learn to implement strategies to promote the development of life skills.