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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Enjoyment in Youth Soccer: its portrayals among Twelve to Fourteen-year-olds

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Abstract

This article reports on a qualitative study that explored the experiences adolescents have in Norwegian soccer teams. The sample included soccer players aged 12 to 14 years who participated in the Promoting Adolescence Physical Activity project (PAPA). The data represents twelve focus groups: seven girls' teams and five boys' teams and indicates that a central component of the soccer players' experience was simply enjoyment. Their descriptions of this enjoyment resembles the psychological phenomenon of *flow*, the experience of feeling fully engaged and of having concentrated energy, focus, and positive emotions. The results also suggest six components of their enjoyment of youth soccer: being with friends, collaborating with teammates, choosing to play the sport, having a supportive coach, and learning new skills and demonstrating mastery of them. The findings support previous conclusions in the literature about what constitutes enjoyment among young athletes. This paper adds, however, detail and depth to the collective understanding of adolescents' experiences in soccer, since no previous studies of youth soccer in Norway have applied qualitative methods. Norwegian youth soccer has a pronounced emphasis on learning and enjoyment for all, regardless of the level of talent or competitiveness of

individual players, and this emphasis, added to the prevailing community support for and parental leadership of youth soccer, offers interesting perspectives on enjoyment in youth soccer.

Keywords: Youth soccer players; enjoyment; friends; coach; choice; mastery

Introduction

Previous studies report a number of aspects of sports involvement that the participants perceive as being positive and enjoyable.¹ Research coming from Scandinavia, however, tends to examine young people's experiences and enjoyment of sports through quantitative methods. Because of this tendency, there remains a significant gap in the literature, a failure to account fully for the way youth actually experience a sport. This paper, therefore, aims for the first time to describe Norwegian youths' soccer experiences by means of qualitative methods. The specific aim of the paper is to answer the question: What constitutes "enjoyment" for adolescents participating in soccer?

Worldwide, 9.4 million youth under the age of 18 are registered in soccer clubs, as noted in *FIFA Magazine* in July, 2007. In Norway, more than a third of all children and youth (44% of boys and 33 % of girls — 181,000 boys and 84,000 girls) play on a team, as the Norwegian Soccer Association [NFF] reported on its website on July 12, 2013. Soccer, which in Norway has a community-based form of organization with coaching and management being the responsibility of parents, is by far the most popular sport for children and youth. It is not uncommon for children to begin playing on a team in 1st grade, and, because of strong parental involvement, soccer is also often the only organized sport offered to them throughout childhood. Research has suggested that what children enjoy at an early age they are more likely to continue doing in the future, whereas the lack of enjoyment is likely to lead them to drop out.² This finding has been specifically confirmed with regard to youth soccer.³ Kjonniksen et al.'s study further showed that young people who are playing soccer at age 15 are more likely to still be playing the sport at age 23 than 15-year-olds involved in other sports.⁴ A long-term commitment to a sport is desirable because sports offer personal growth and development, contributing not only to physical well-

being, but also to cognitive, affective, social and moral well-being.⁵ A good understanding of the elements and consequences of enjoyment in youth soccer may contribute to the development of enjoyment of sports in other settings, something that will prove conducive to maintaining involvement in sports beyond adolescence.

Background

Enjoyment of sports has been defined as “a positive affective response to sport experience that reflects generalized feelings such as pleasure, liking and fun”.⁶ Although qualitative and quantitative research have provided some understanding of the meaning and nature of the enjoyment of sports, McCarthy, Jones, and Clark-Carter argue that there is still a gap in research regarding the developmental differences of the sources of this enjoyment.⁷ Understanding how the different sources of enjoyment of sport develop from childhood through adolescence would influence the principles and practices of those who seek to use enjoyment to motivate children and youth to practice any given sport.⁸

Previous research regarding the sources of enjoyment in sports has highlighted age-related differences as to what constitutes enjoyment.⁹ MacPhail and colleagues demonstrated that enjoyment and fun in the sports participation of younger children came from the social element and from play, while for older children fun was more closely related to the excitement of competing and performing.¹⁰ In a different vein, Ullrich-French and Smith’s study demonstrated that a youth’s relationships with parents and peers will help predict motivational outcomes, thereby suggesting that enjoyment, perceived competence, and self-motivation are linked to the quality of these relationships.¹¹ The perception of peer acceptance was an especially important predictor as children become adolescents and their peers take on more importance in their lives.¹²

Because soccer is a team sport involving collaboration with teammates and feedback from peers, the soccer team provides an important venue for youth to experience friendship and peer approval, to engage in bonding, and to establish social networks.¹³ Wold and her colleagues argue that team sports, as opposed to individual sports, tend to provide participants with greater opportunities for positive developmental experiences because of the high degree of interdependence among team members for the performance of a task.¹⁴ Hence, the social aspect of involvement in soccer seems to be an important predictor of enjoyment.

The phenomenon of *flow* has been defined as a psychological state in which people feel efficient, motivated, and happy.¹⁵ The experience of flow in team sports has received less attention than experiences of flow in individual sports, because it has been argued that individual sports are more likely to elicit flow.¹⁶ Elbe and colleagues found, however, that participants in different exercise groups (continuous running, soccer, interval running, and strength training) experienced high levels of flow regardless of whether the activity was collective or individual.¹⁷ Flow is intrinsically motivating for participants and influences participants' continued commitment to being physically active.¹⁸ Thus, the experience of flow in youth soccer is to be welcomed since it enhances young people's intrinsic motivation to remain involved in the sport.¹⁹

An essential component of flow is a sense of autonomy, setting one's own goals and finding ways of achieving them²⁰, and this might be one reason why flow has not been extensively studied in relation to team sports. Although soccer players are under the supervision of a coach and are not entirely free to pursue their own goals while training or during matches, adults can help promote a sense of autonomy by providing challenges that offer opportunities to youth to learn on their own. Studies from the domain of sports further indicate that learning and "getting better" are associated with enjoyable experiences.²¹ Those coaches who can foster skills development by balancing the level of difficulty with the athletes' abilities, will contribute to the

enjoyment of the sport.²² Indeed, the study by Bakker and colleagues showed that performance feedback and support from the coach predict flow and peak performances during a soccer game.²³

How the coach perceives success and values competence also determines whether or not youth sports enjoyment is enhanced by adult leadership. Duda and Nicholls associate task-oriented goals with increased enjoyment, while associating performance-oriented goals with less enjoyment.²⁴ Because their focus is on learning and development rather than success and superiority, task-oriented soccer coaches seem to be more likely to contribute to enjoyable experiences than performance-oriented coaches. Since such a high proportion of Norwegian youth and children play soccer and since there is only a single recreational league through age 12, many of the Norwegian children and youth who play soccer are neither very interested in the game itself nor especially talented. They play on a team because soccer is likely to be the only organized sport offered to them in their community and because their classmates and neighbors also play on the team. The rules and regulations of this league underscore coaches' responsibilities to emphasize learning and development to promote enjoyment for all, rather than competition and superiority in order to promote excellence in a few.

There is, however, a significant drop out rate from Norwegian youth soccer during middle adolescents. This attrition could result from a lack of enjoyment, other things to do, negative interaction, dislike of the coach, or a lack of perceived success.²⁵ Since no previous research has employed qualitative methods to explore the experiences of middle adolescents in Norwegian youth soccer, this paper addresses this need. A qualitative approach should provide details and nuances of what it is like to play soccer at this age. The specific research questions were:

- (1) What is it like to play soccer from the perspective of 12- to 14-year-olds?
- (2) Which factors contribute to enjoyment of soccer for this age group?

Methods

The PAPA project, funded by the European Commission is an intervention study aimed at improving the quality of youth soccer in order to promote adolescent health through long term participation in the sport.²⁶ The PAPA project developed, delivered and evaluated a theoretically-grounded and evidence-based coach education program which guides grassroots coaches in providing quality motivation to make youth soccer more supportive, engaging and enjoyable.²⁷ This article reports on a qualitative Norwegian study located within the larger PAPA project. Conducting the study under the PAPA umbrella offered a pool of teams from which players could be drawn for the interviews. Furthermore, the quantitative data already collected within the PAPA project, offered the opportunity at a later point in time to combine the qualitative data with quantitative data for a clearer understanding of emerging themes in the qualitative portion of the project.

Interview subjects and sampling procedures

This study was approved by the Norwegian Social Science Data Services, which required informed consent from the parents of the participants. The interviewed youth were recruited from 12 teams in three different regions in Norway: Southeast, North, and West. All the head coaches of these teams had been invited to participate in the larger PAPA project, and had been informed that this included research concerning the experiences of their players. Because the qualitative phase took place at the end of the soccer season, it was difficult to recruit sufficient coaches and teams for this portion of the project. Many teams ended their seasons at the beginning of October, and thus the selection of the 12 teams was primarily based which ones were holding practices in October. The final pool consisted of seven teams of 12-year-old players, four teams of 13-year-

old players, and one team of 14-year-old players. All the teams were single-sex teams from the recreational league. Five boys' teams and seven girls' teams participated in the study. The length of each player's involvement in soccer varied from 1 to 7 years, with the majority of players having begun to play soccer at age 6 or 7. Two teams were coached by female coaches, while 10 teams were coached by male coaches, male coaches being the norm in Norway. Given the high level of parental involvement, however, most teams enjoy a balance of men and women in the other support roles.

Each team coach recruited players for the focus groups by means of a hand-delivered invitation and information sheet required by the study and given to all the players on each team (approximately 180 players total). None of the players on any of the teams refused to participate in the interviews, and a total of 140 players turned in the consent forms. From this pool, six to eight players per team were randomly selected for a total study sample of 39 girls and 34 boys, an uneven number accounted for by the uneven number of boys' and girls' teams providing the sample. Since the invitation was handed out by each coach, this may have prejudiced recruiting to some extent, due to a desire to please the coach.

Data collection

The preferred method of data collection was focus groups. Researchers underscore the advantages of this method when exploring young people's views and experiences.²⁸ Focus groups create a safe environment and replicate the settings that children are accustomed to in the classroom. Safety and familiarity afford participants the opportunity to share their own opinions freely. Moreover, the peer support provided by the group helps to correct the power imbalance that occurs between the researcher and the participants in one-on-one interviews.²⁹

The meetings of the 12 focus groups were conducted during fall, 2011, in each team's club house by the three first authors of this article. A university student participated as the observer. She was placed outside the interview circle as a non-participant in the discussion. The meetings lasted between 25 minutes and 40 minutes. The interviews were semi-structured, and the first three authors developed an interview guide that took into account the research on sports enjoyment and physical activity. This guide was pre-tested with a trial sample of 4 boys and 4 girls from the same age groups and from teams not involved in PAPA. As a result of the pre-test, some of the questions were rephrased and edited to make the language less formal and more age-appropriate for the interviewees. Although the guide provided the basic structure, deviations were allowed during the interviews in order to fully explore varying responses.

The meetings of all the focus groups were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interviews began by explaining what was being studied, why it was important to record the interview, and also how each subject's participation would contribute to a greater knowledge of youth soccer. The adult leaders explained the importance of group confidentiality and provided assurance that data would be treated anonymously. The participants provided their names and ages, and also years of soccer experience. This introductory phase of the interview helped to set the focus group at ease before approaching the questions in the interview guide. The participants were free to leave the focus group at any time if they did not feel comfortable.

After the introductory phase, the questions led to a discussion regarding the enjoyment of soccer by the players, their feelings while playing soccer in practice and in matches, and their interaction with the coach and teammates. These questions included: "Can you describe a soccer practice that you really enjoyed?"; "What made this practice particularly enjoyable?"; "Can you describe a soccer practice that you did not enjoy?"; "Why did you not enjoy this practice?"; "Can you tell how you feel when things go well in practice?"; and, "What do you think are the

responsibilities of a youth soccer coach?” The interviewees were encouraged to ask for an explanation if they did not understand the wording or the meaning of a question. They were also encouraged to respond freely, and no one was forced to respond. In most focus groups, the participants did speak freely and with feeling regarding the topic at hand. In two focus groups, however, the respondents were less outspoken and needed more prompting, probably because the two focus groups represented newly formed teams in which the teammates were new to each other. The interviewer would conclude the meeting by asking the group members if they wanted to add something to important questions or topics and by asking the observer to follow up on responses which seemed unclear or add questions the interviewer had missed. There was no discernible gender difference with regard to either the focus group participation or the responses to specific questions.

Data analysis

After the first focus groups had met, the initial phase of the data analysis began and involved shared reflections and discussions among the three interviewers regarding the responses given. This initial phase of the analysis helped bring the data collection into focus around emerging themes. After all the focus groups had met, the formal preparation and analysis followed an eight-step procedure adopted by Keegan, as follows:³⁰

1. The data were transcribed verbatim.
2. The interview transcripts were read and reread by the first, second and third author for complete familiarity with the raw data.
3. The manuscripts from the 12 interviews were organized following the interview guide.

4. The first author broke the responses from each focus group into units of analysis, called units of meaning³¹ (for example, the following quotes are three such units: “we play soccer because it is fun and because we get together with friends”, “a good coach sees all the players on a team”, “challenging soccer matches are more fun to win than easy matches”).
5. The units of meaning from each focus group were then compared to units of meaning from the other focus groups, and similar units of meaning were grouped into categories (such as *enjoyment is fun*, *enjoyment is like flow* and *the coach matters for enjoyment*) and in turn the categories were grouped into overall themes³² (for example: being with friends, choosing to play the sport, having a supportive coach).
6. All the three co-authors who had led focus groups, together participated in a critical assessment of the identified units of meaning, categories, and themes.
7. To ensure that identified categories and themes as well as the overall organization of the data made the most analytical sense, the co-authors continued to formulate critical questions throughout the different stages of the analysis and manuscript writing.

Although focus group member checking is recommended as one of Keegan’s eight steps for qualitative data analysis,³³ this step could not be performed for validation in the current study since there had been turnover of coaches and players by the time the interviews had been transcribed. The data analysis was performed using QSR N-Vivo9 software.

Results

When the players were asked about their overall experience playing soccer, they highlighted positive aspects of this experience. In particular they talked about enjoyment as its

central component. Enjoyment was an expectation that led them to choose to play soccer in the first place, and the main reason they continued to play. The soccer players described enjoyment on the field in terms of feelings: “feeling good”, “feeling energized”, and “feeling happy.” They indicated experiencing these feelings both as individuals and as a team. Consider the following quotes from a team of 13-year-old boys:

It’s like a boost (Player 1).

You get in a way, I don’t know how to put it (Player 2).

It’s like a flow of happiness (Player 3).

And then you feel like working even harder (Player 4).

You get an adrenalin kick even at training (Player 3).

Often enjoyment was portrayed as being “in the moment,” or complete immersion in the activity.

One 13-year-old girls’ team said:

I remember a training session we were really concentrated and focused. Of course, we had fun and talked together, but we were really in the moment, and this training smelled of sweat. I don’t know how to explain it, but it was really a good training and I felt that the majority improved. So I like those trainings where we improve and have fun together the best (Player 1).

What does it mean to be in the moment (Interviewer)?

Engaged (Player 2).

And concentrated (Player 1).

Not to fool around too much, but to have fun and concentrate at the same time (Player 3).

And that you give it all, all that you have in a way (Player 4).

Six main themes central to the soccer players' enjoyment emerged from the data: 1. being with friends, 2. collaborating with teammates, 3. choosing to play the sport, 4. having a supportive coach, 5. learning new skills, and 6. demonstrating mastery of them.

Theme one: being with friends

The social dimension of being a member of a team was an important reason young soccer players gave for being involved in the sport. The players expressed that getting together with friends on the team made them happy even on days when they did not feel like attending training. They shared a common experience with their teammates, and enjoyed supporting each other whether they succeeded or failed. This is from a 13-year-old girls' team:

If you miss a ball, you get this feeling in the stomach thinking, oh no, this was my mistake, but than the others support you (Player 1).

So if you do a mistake, you still get support (Interviewer)?

Yes, it's not like, 'Oh my God you play so poorly!' . . . It'll never be like that on our team (Player 1).

Other teams may yell, but our team is not like that (Player 2).

Theme two: collaborating with teammates

The soccer players described collaborating with teammates as essential to enjoyment. The most memorable matches and trainings involved good team work and a positive atmosphere on the team. The participants talked about collaboration as an inherent characteristic of the sport, and they stressed that soccer is not a sport for individuals who are interested in showing off or being egocentric. Proper and fun soccer involves working with others, regardless of how talented they are as individual players. The following is from a 13-year-old girls team.

There will be no game if we don't collaborate (Player 1).

The players on a team can be really good individual players, but this is not enough. You also need to know how to play together. You have to learn how to pass the ball to your teammates and stuff (Player 2).

Yes, soccer is about collaboration, it is this kind of sport (Player 3).

A team sport (Player 4).

You can be awesome with touches, but if you want to be really, really good, then you need to collaborate with your mates (Player 5).

You can't play the game alone (Player 6).

Yes, you need to inspire your mates to work too (Player 5).

Theme three: choosing to play the sport

The participants indicated that a key element in their enjoyment of soccer was their ability to exercise choice in whether or not they signed up for the sport in the first place. They played soccer because they wanted to and because of the pleasure they derived from it, not from a sense of obligation. Freedom of choice is implied in these quotes from a 12-year-old boys' team:

So why do you play soccer (Interviewer)?

It is fun, and it is social (Player 1).

It is fun and it is good exercise (Player 2).

Football is *the* perfect hobby (Player 3).

It is fun to play, and you get to be with your friends (Player 4).

Some of the participants did say that their parents had strongly advised participation in an organized sport (for the health benefits), but they did not say that they had been "pressured" to play.

Theme four: having a supportive coach

The participants made an association between enjoyment in soccer and a supportive and attentive coach. From a 12-year-old girls' team:

I think it is important that coaches support and encourage us, and tell us what to change, to improve, and say that it is ok even if we lose (Player 3).

Our coaches are good at that. When they say I did well, I want to perform even better (Player 2).

Yes, you get this feeling inside that you want to keep on performing better (Player 4).

The participants also indicated that it was essential that the coach make all players feel valuable and important to the team. They appreciated coaches who believe that players of different strengths and abilities play different but equally important roles on a team. A supportive coach, moreover communicates with the players in a positive and kind manner. The participants described situations in which this had not been the case, in which coaches were too harsh and took things too seriously. These coaches diminished their players' enjoyment of soccer, as illustrated by this 14-year-old boys team:

We had a coach who got mad if we made mistakes (Player 1).

How did that affect your enjoyment (Interviewer)?

I really wanted to quit then, but fortunately he quit (Player 2).

Why did you want to quit (Interviewer)?

He yelled a lot. We practiced a particular drill once and some of us forgot what to do, and then he got mad and pushed one boy to the ground and used very bad language (Player 1).

He was so pissed off (Player 4).

He destroyed all our fun (Player 3).

He was so serious (Player 1).

Too serious (Player 2).

The players were also asked whether or not the coach was allowing for participation in decision-making and if this mattered for enjoyment. On the field, the players were not often included in decision-making, and they said that the coaches only occasionally invited them to make choices about which drills to work on or which tactics to use. This lack of choice on the field or in training was not, however, perceived as detrimental to enjoyment, once the choice to participate in the sport had already been made.

Theme five: learning

The participants talked about learning soccer's technical skills as well as learning to collaborate with teammates. They differentiated between learning as individual players and learning as a team. It was learning to work as a team that was singled out as particularly enjoyable. The coach was key to this particular aspect of learning, because although some players could have learned and improved individual skills by themselves or with an older player, the coach was the one with a vision of what the team could do as a team, provided he or she gave specific and understandable instructions. Players perceived such vague expressions as "good job" and "way to go" as encouragement but not as valuable feedback which would help them learn

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and improve. Another aspect of the coach's role in teaching teamwork that the players mentioned, was making them feel secure and organizing drills that provided opportunities for all players to learn within their individual areas of mastery. From a 13-year-old boys' team:

So how then can your coach help you learn (Interviewer)?

Make the players feel secure (Player 4).

And how can the coach make the players feel secure (Interviewer)?

By talking to them and offering challenges. You can give the player a challenge that he performs successfully, and then the player will feel secure and that he can accomplish this, and then you may go from there (Player 4).

Help me feel self-confident and more secure (Player 2).

Provide opportunities (Player 1).

Theme six: demonstrating mastery of skills

After having learned a skill, the participants described how the experience of using a mastered skill improved their self-confidence, and how this generated a positive cycle which led to even more improvement, self-confidence, mastery, and good feeling. Mastery thus emerged as the sixth and final factor in enjoyment. From a team of 13-year-old boys:

Experiencing mastery generates the good feeling (Player 2).

This good feeling is important because it builds our self-confidence, and when our self-confidence improves, we feel like working even harder (Player 1).

Yes, this good feeling is very important to our performance (Player 2).

As they had for learning, the participants distinguished between experiencing individual and team mastery. In describing training sessions and matches that had been particularly enjoyable, experiences of team mastery were highlighted. Inherent to the concept of mastery was

a feeling of being challenged, either as an individual player or together with teammates. The participants expressed that experiences of mastery against an “easy” opponent produced less enjoyment and excitement than mastery demonstrated against a difficult challenge. The first quote below illustrates how a 13-year-old experiences challenge and personal mastery despite his team’s loss, while the second quote shows how a team of 12-year-old girls experiences challenge and mastery as a team:

I remember playing against a wing who was a real fighter. I get so much adrenalin in football. My position is back, and I love to give effort, so their wing got so pissed off. I got pissed off as well, but I handled it each time. I was so happy after this match. We lost, but I still love that I managed to tackle him (Player 1).

When we played against (team), it was a mini tournament and they were really, really good. This is the only team we have met who plays like us (Player 1).

They pass the ball like we do. We play the ball a lot, but many teams don’t, but (team) passed the ball in the same way (Player 2).

But that probably made it harder for you to play against this team (Interviewer)?

Yes, it was harder, but it was a lot of fun because we won by one goal. They were really good, but we still won by one (Player 3).

Discussion

The interviews indicated that enjoyment is central to the players’ experience of soccer. The players perceived the following as contributing to their enjoyment of the sport: being with friends, collaborating with teammates, choosing to play the sport, having a supportive coach, and learning new skills, and demonstrating mastery of them. In their descriptions of enjoyment of soccer, the participants talked about feeling “good”, “energized”, “happy,” and fully concentrated and

immersed in the activity. These portrayals of enjoyment, experienced both individually and collectively, resemble the phenomenon of flow. Bakker's study among talented 14- to 18-year-old male soccer players also indicate that soccer may facilitate flow.³⁴ The current study supports and extends Bakker's research. It indicates that 12- to 14-year-old players may experience flow in soccer, and perhaps more importantly, that flow-like experiences seem to appear among all players independent of skill level and gender.

Bakker and colleagues showed that experiences of flow are more likely on teams where the athletes feel connected to their teammates and the coach.³⁵ The results of this study also link enjoyment with being with friends, collaborating with teammates, and having a supportive coach. Since adolescence is a period of transition in which young people begin to become independent from their parents, social relationships with peers and other adults become increasingly important for enjoyment of activities.³⁶ Involvement in leisure activities may therefore provide a significant opportunity to link with friends and adults with similar interests, and to share experiences and goals.³⁷ Within the past 30 years, the number of Norwegian children and youth participating in soccer has tripled. In fact, 33% of households nationwide rank the soccer club as the most important meeting point in their local community after family and school.³⁸ It is not uncommon that all the boys in a given class at school will sign up together for a soccer team when recruiting begins in first or second grade and will all play together for six or seven years. Norwegian children and youth who choose not to be involved in the sport, therefore, miss out on a significant social experience for both players and parents. The greater social relevance of youth soccer in Norway may skew the results of our study, showing that in Norway involvement in youth soccer provides more opportunities for youth to be together, learn, and work towards shared goals than might a similar study in a country where the game of soccer plays a less significant role in the local community.

Furthermore, it is also possible that because collaboration is an integral part of team performance, and because the game requires complementary skills and competencies among the team members, soccer has the potential to produce enjoyment for youth, even when they may not be particularly skilled or talented. A good player needs to develop not only physical skills but also skills in collaboration and communication. How one moves without the ball and how one communicates with one's teammates is every bit as important as one's ball-handling skills.³⁹ One makes other players better by moving into supporting positions and offering feedback as much as by one's passing ability. Given the multi-faceted and collaborative nature of the game, the soccer team may be the context for youth to experience enjoyment not only through social interaction as they would at a party, but also through learning together, developing together, and accomplishing goals together.

The results also point to the players' positive feelings when demonstrating mastery of new skills and performing well. The link between feeling competent and experiencing enjoyment is consistent with a study by Scarpa and Nart, which indicated that perceived sport competence is a good predictor of enjoyment related to physical activity.⁴⁰ The results in the current study suggest that practice sessions and matches are especially enjoyable when mastery is demonstrated by both individuals and the team as a whole while they face a significant challenge. Elbe and colleagues suggest that for a challenge to produce an experience of mastery and flow, the difficulty of the task needs to match the skills of the individuals, since the experience of too "easy" a challenge may lead to boredom, whereas the experience of too difficult a challenge may produce anxiety.⁴¹ Since previous studies as well as the current one indicate that enjoyment in youth sports comes in part from achievement-related factors, these studies all suggest that coaches working with youth should foster development of skills in a way which balances the skill's level of difficulty with the athletes' abilities.⁴² The NFF's vision for grass roots soccer is "As many as possible – for as long

as possible – as well as possible”. In 2012 the NFF published 10 guidelines for coaches working with children and youth. The following four guidelines seem to fit especially well with the results of this study: 1) as attentive as possible towards each and every player, 2) all players are equally important, 3) small teams to provide practice and play time for all, and 4) (safety vs. challenge) + mastery = enjoyment and development⁴³. The current study suggests that the players perceive the coaches as indeed carrying out this vision.

Freedom of choice emerged as central to enjoyment. The participants expressed that they played soccer because it was fun and because they wanted to, not because they had to. Fraser-Thomas, Cote and Deakin⁴⁴ have suggested that young athletes who receive positive support and encouragement from parents as opposed to pressure, experience more enjoyment from sports, show greater preference for a challenge, and display greater intrinsic motivation; whereas Gagne⁴⁵ indicated that athletes with autonomous forms of motivation on average have more positive experiences in sport than athletes with more extrinsic forms of motivation. The feeling of being self-directed and having the freedom to choose for one’s self to be involved thus seem to be an essential reason why soccer is so enjoyable.

Although choosing to play the sport was identified as significant for the players’ enjoyment, having a say in practice and in matches did not turn out to be important to them. In Norwegian youth soccer, short games of six-on-six constitute a substantial amount of the practice time.⁴⁶ It may be therefore that players experience autonomous choice in that context, even if they don’t report being much involved in decision-making during practice. Research on the teaching games for understanding theory⁴⁷ supports the suggestion that games with small “half-teams” may be suitable for developing players by encouraging joint problem-solving in realistic scenarios.⁴⁸ This model recognizes the intimate relationship between decision-making and skill execution,⁴⁹ and advocates that explicit information and guidance have an essential supplement in

learning through problem-solving in game situations.⁵⁰ Thus, young soccer players may take advantage of the didactic principles in teaching games for understanding theory, and coach-led activities and decision-making that employ this theory seem to enhance rather than diminish their enjoyment of soccer.⁵¹ Since in Norway the soccer teams are coached and managed by parents in the community, adults who would be known to the players from other settings, these teams are a very safe environment, the kind of informal and less competitive environment where adult leadership is experienced as friendly accompaniment rather than authoritative instruction. This may also explain why players experienced uncoerced choice in their participation.

According to the self-determination theory, motivational climates which support and satisfy the innate human needs for relatedness, competence and autonomy enhance the enjoyment of individuals.⁵² The results in this study also support the self-determination theory since the six themes arising from the focus groups reflect these three innate psychological needs.

Limitations and recommendations for future research

This study faced certain limitations that further research will need to address with a broader sample. Our sample was colored by three special factors. First, the soccer players were recruited from teams whose head coaches had participated in a six-hour workshop to make youth sport more engaging, empowering, and enjoyable. Consequently, the coaches may have been particularly concerned about creating positive motivational climates. Two other papers reporting on Norwegian coaches involved in the PAPA project, however, indicate that the elements of the Empowering Coaching program had been implemented only to a certain degree. In their own evaluations of the training, the coaches themselves indicated that at least some of the training merely reinforced what they were already doing, and the workshop did not significantly change their coaching style.⁵³ They indicated that the empowering coaching principles introduced by

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PAPA fit well with values and strategies that they already employed. Hence, there is little reason to suppose that the experience of the players in the current study will deviate much from that of other Norwegian soccer players.

The second limitation this study faced has to do with the question of whether or not the data collection method of using focus groups provided an environment that was sufficiently safe and comfortable for youth to openly discuss sensitive issues. The group dynamics may have inhibited those who had different opinions from the majority. With their peers present, this minority may not have felt free to discuss their negative feelings towards coaches, parents or teammates. Future research ought to explore youth soccer through the use of one-to-one interviews in order to better portray possible negative experiences.

This study's third limitation had to do with the age range of 12- to 14. Since there were not an equal number of teams from each age involved in the study (with only one team of 14-year olds), the scope of the study did not allow for separate data analyses for each of the three ages. Since the rules and regulations from the Norwegian Soccer Association allow for more competitive play at age 13, the factors for soccer enjoyment for 13- and 14-year-olds may differ significantly from those for 12-year-olds. Future studies, therefore, ought to explore possible differences in soccer enjoyment during mid adolescence. Our study did not suggest that gender differentiation would be helpful, at least not for exploring factors contributing to enjoyment of soccer in this age group in Norway.

Conclusion

The results suggest that enjoyment was a central component in the soccer players' experience. Enjoyment was expressed in terms of feeling good, energized and happy. Being with friends, collaborating with teammates, choosing to play the sport, having a supportive coach,

learning new skills, and demonstrating mastery of them, all these contribute to enjoyment. The notion of being embedded in a positive motivational climate met young people's needs for relatedness, autonomy and competence. This environment seems essential to enjoyable experiences in youth soccer. The physical and mental health benefits of developing an active lifestyle in childhood are unquestionable, so a better understanding of what produces enjoyment in youth sport is important because it contributes to enhancing young people's sports experience and increasing the likelihood of long term sports involvement.

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Notes

1. Bakker, A.B. et al., "Flow and performance," 442; Keegan, R.J. et al., "Exploring the motivational climate," 361; Ryba, T.V., "Cartwheels on ice," 58.
2. Green, K., "Mission impossible?" 366.
3. McCarthy, J. et al., "Enjoyment youth sport," 143.
4. Kjonniksen, L. et al., "Tracking of leisure-time," 2.
5. Ulrich-French, S., and A.L. Smith, "Relationships with parents and peers," 202.
6. Scanland, T. K., "Sources of enjoyment," 202.
7. McCarthy, J. et al., "Enjoyment youth sport," 143.
8. Ibid.
9. MacPhail, A. et al. "Young people's socialization," 260.
10. Ibid.
11. Ulrich-French, S., and A.L. Smith, "Relationships with parents and peers," 202.
12. Ibid.
13. Allender, S. et al., "Understanding participation in sport," 830; Ulrich-French, S., and A.L. Smith, "Social and motivational predictors," 87.
14. Wold, B. et al., "Comparing self-reported leisure-time," 328.
15. Gagne, M. "Autonomy support," 372.
16. Larson, R.W., "Positive youth development," 174.
17. Bakker, A.B. et al., "Flow and performance," 447; Ryba, T.V., "Cartwheels on ice," 58.
18. Ryba, T.V., "Cartwheels on ice," 70.
19. Bakker, A.B. et al., "Flow and performance," 447.
20. Seifert, T. and C. Hedderson, "Intrinsic motivation and flow," 277
21. Bakker, A.B. et al., "Flow and performance," 443.
22. Ryba, T.V., "Cartwheels on ice," 70.

23. Bakker, A.B. et al., "Flow and performance," 447.
24. Duda, J.L. and J.G. Nicholls, "Achievement motivation," 290.
25. Fraser-Thomas, J. et al., "Adolescent sport dropout," 320;
26. Duda, J. L. et al., "Promoting adolescent health," 319.
27. Ibid., 114.
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29. Ibid.
30. Keegan, R.J. et al., "Exploring the motivational climate," 361.
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32. Barnett, L., K. et al., "Adolescents' perception," 275.
33. Keegan, R.J. et al., "Exploring the motivational climate," 364.
34. Ibid.
35. Bakker, A.B. et al., "Flow and performance," 447.
36. Ibid.
37. Leversen, I. et al., "Leisure activities and adolescents," 1595.
38. Bjerneby, S.I., "The mission of soccer," 1.
39. Light, R.L., "Social nature of games," 289.
40. Scarpa, S. and A. Nart, "Perceived sport competence," 203.
41. Elbe, A.M. et al., "Experiencing flow," 112.
42. Ryba, T.V., "Cartwheels on ice," 70.
43. Bjerneby, S.I., "The mission of soccer," 3.
44. Fraser-Thomas, J.L. et al., "Youth sport programs," 28.
45. Gagne, M., "Autonomy support and needs satisfaction," 372.

46. Bergo, A., "Ferdighetsutvikling i fotball [Skill development in football]," 62.
47. Bunker, D. and R. Thorpe, "A model for the teaching of games," 5.
48. Griffin, L.L. et al. "Teaching games for understanding," 221.
49. Light, R.L., "The social nature of games," 292.
50. Dyson, B. et al., "Sport education, tactical games, and cooperative learning," 228.
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