

# Introduction to the Special Issue on Contemporary Youth Sport: Critical Issues and Future Directions

Alan L. Smith and Daniel Gould

This special issue consists of papers emanating from a conference celebrating the 40th anniversary of the Michigan State University Institute for the Study of Youth Sports (ISYS) held at Michigan State University (MSU) on November 29 through December 1, 2018. Sport is an impactful, highly popular, and extraordinarily important developmental activity for many young people. Whether in its most informal, playful contexts or highly structured and organized forms, youth sport potentially offers physical, psychological, and social benefits; an optimal space for exploration and self-actualization; a medium for negotiating other aspects of life such as school or work; and immersive experiences that capture the imagination. Youth sport also possesses its ills, including lack of voice for participants, accessibility challenges in less prosperous communities, and as young people age, exploitation and injury risks. Considering the array of potential benefits, as well as detrimental aspects, of youth sport and the importance of optimizing youth development outcomes in the interest of healthy individuals and societies, it is valuable to understand the connection between youth and sport historically, as it is expressed in contemporary society and as it may evolve in the future. Over the past 4 decades there has been progressive growth of intensive, concerted scholarly efforts on youth sport. In this special issue of *Kinesiology Review* (KR), we bring together world-leading scholars to take stock of the knowledge base, critical contemporary issues, and key gaps in our understanding of youth sport.

Bringing these scholars together was facilitated by the ISYS 40th anniversary conference. From the ISYS's founding, scholarship has been a core feature of its mission. Therefore, when considering how to best celebrate the anniversary, the faculty and staff of the ISYS believed that holding an international conference focused on current issues and future directions in youth sport would be particularly fitting. Our goal as organizers was to provide a forum for the modest, but ever-growing, group of devoted sport scientists who have been studying youth sport to share their work and ideas. What these researchers have discovered and their perspectives on the current state and future of youth sport hold important implications for the healthy growth and development of young people.

While holding a major conference was a worthy objective in and of itself, we believed that disseminating the information provided by the invited speakers to a broader audience via a well-known publication outlet would have even greater impact and lasting value. So, we approached Human Kinetics (HK) and

then editor in chief of KR Maureen Weiss with the idea of co-editing a special issue of the journal that would include papers from the conference. Both HK and Professor Weiss were receptive to the idea and encouraged us to move forward. Their support met with the enthusiastic backing of the incoming editor in chief of KR, David Wiggins; the committed efforts of the invited contributors; and the assistance of a group of expert external reviewers. Thus, a broad community of scholars has helped bring this special issue on contemporary youth sport to fruition. We hope that this issue informs science and practice in youth sport and helps stimulate an acceleration of scholarship on the topic over the coming decades.

In the following sections, we offer a brief overview of the origins and mission of the ISYS, emphasizing its role in identifying critical youth sport issues and using sport-science research to address those issues. We believe that the ISYS has played an important role in the development and direction of youth sport scholarship. We then provide an overview of the organization and contents of this special issue. The issue addresses a broad range of topics and critical issues in contemporary youth sport that have bearing on the development and well-being of young people. Finally, we close with acknowledgments and final thoughts. The state of knowledge on youth sport owes to the efforts of many, and with the continued commitment of youth sport scholars and professionals, many of them included in this issue, we believe that sport programs for young people can be improved and made far more beneficial and educationally sound.

## The Institute for the Study of Youth Sports

The ISYS was intentionally formed to address critical issues in sport for children and adolescents (see Seefeldt, 1999, for an historical overview). Carl Pursell, a former Michigan high school teacher and coach and state senator who later went on to become a member of the U.S. House of Representatives, became concerned with some of the practices he observed in children's sports and wondered how pervasive they were. After he talked to representatives from MSU, it was decided that a comprehensive study of youth sports was needed. Led by Vern Seefeldt of the MSU Department of Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance, the Joint Legislative Study on Youth Sports Programs commenced in 1975 and involved a consortium of researchers from not only MSU but also Lake Superior State College, the University of Michigan, and Wayne State University. The overall purpose of the study was to assess the impact of selected competitive sport programs on young people age 5–17 years, with a focus on determining the beneficial and detrimental effects of such programs on the physical, psychological, and social development of youth participants. The study consisted of three phases conducted from 1975 to 1978.

---

The authors are with the Dept. of Kinesiology, Inst. for the Study of Youth Sports, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI. Smith ([alsmith@msu.edu](mailto:alsmith@msu.edu)) is corresponding author.

The first phase of the Joint Legislative Study involved a statewide survey of over 100,000 children (Joint Legislative Study Committee, 1976). It was designed to describe the status of agency-sponsored competitive athletic programs for children. Among its many findings was that the number of youth sport participants was greater than previously thought at the time. Reported participation in one or more organized sports in the previous year was 81% for boys and 48% for girls. Another finding was that participation trends showed an increase up to about age 12–13 years and then a sharp decline—a pattern that holds true today. The second phase involved surveying a subsample of young athletes ( $n = 1,162$ ) and their parents ( $n = 1,466$ ) from the first phase, as well as nonathletes ( $n = 611$ ) and parents of nonathletes ( $n = 1,035$ ), and examined the physical, social, and medical aspects of youth sports (Joint Legislative Study Committee, 1978a). Among the findings was that most children were exposed to sport through agency-sponsored programs. Although respondents were generally satisfied with these programs, they raised some serious issues and concerns about unscientific training practices (e.g., the use of contraindicated exercises). This highlighted the critical need for scientific attention to youth sport and transmission of knowledge to coaches, parents, and others who administered youth sport programs.

The third and final phase of the project involved surveys of 1,127 coaches, 477 officials, and 337 sport administrators (Joint Legislative Study Committee, 1978b). Questions like those used in the second phase were employed, focusing on the reasons for which individuals became involved in the programs, working relationships between the parties involved, medical conditions, qualifications of the adults involved, and in-service education needs. Among the many findings was the lack of good interpersonal relationships among various youth sport stakeholders. Relationships between coaches and officials and relationships between officials and parents received the lowest ratings. A lack of safety and first-aid procedures was also reported. In addition, over half the survey respondents favored some sort of in-service education for those involved in agency-sponsored youth sport, as the competence of coaches and officials was frequently questioned.

This landmark Joint Legislative Study on Youth Sports Programs led to the conclusion that something needed to be done to provide in-service education and educational materials to youth sport parents, volunteer coaches, and administrators. It was also concluded that there was a need to conduct scientific research involving children in sport. In response to these conclusions and after further discussions with the state legislature, the ISYS was established on April 5, 1978, and housed at MSU. Vern Seefeldt was named the ISYS director, and funding was provided by inserting a line-item budget in the yearly MSU general state appropriation. Faculty were hired to work in the institute, and assistantships supported graduate students to facilitate ISYS initiatives. A number of individuals served as the director or interim director of ISYS over the years, including Vern Seefeldt, Robert Malina, Martha Ewing, and John Haubenstricker. The current director is Daniel Gould, who assumed the role in 2004 and in 2019 was honored as the inaugural Gwen Norrell Professor of Youth Sport and Student-Athlete Well-Being. The unit in which the ISYS is housed is now known as the Department of Kinesiology and remains in the College of Education at MSU.

The ISYS was established with three primary objectives. These included to provide educational materials to parents, volunteer coaches, and administrators; conduct scientific research involving children who are active in sport; and provide in-service

education for volunteer coaches, officials, and administrators. In subsequent years, ISYS staff conducted hundreds of clinics, developed educational materials (e.g., Foley, 1980; Gould, 1980; Gould & Weiss, 1980; Howell, 1980; Smoll & Smith, 1979), established coaching education programs (e.g., Seefeldt & Milligan, 1992), and conducted scientific studies (e.g., Eisenmann, Pivarnik, & Malina, 2001; Feltz, Lirgg, & Albrecht, 1992). The ISYS, then, was charged with not only conducting research on critical issues in youth sport but also engaging in what today would be called translational science.

Over its 4 decades of existence, the ISYS has continued to embrace its original mission while adapting to changes in society, higher education, and youth sport. For example, the ISYS is still heavily involved in coaching education but does not routinely conduct coaching clinics throughout the state. Rather, it works with organizations like the Detroit Police Athletic League, the Michigan High School Athletic Association, and the National Wrestling Coaches Association to help these organizations develop scientifically based and best-practice educational curricula for training coaches, parents, and young athletes. The staff in these organizations are offered the expertise and resources to deliver programs, placing ISYS personnel in more of a support or train-the-trainer role than direct delivery role. The ISYS remains heavily involved in research, conducting studies on important topics such as sport parenting (e.g., Lauer, Gould, Roman, & Pierce, 2010), sport specialization (e.g., Martin, Ewing, & Oregon, 2017), life-skills development in young athletes (e.g., Pierce, Gould, Cowburn, & Driska, 2016), concussions in high school athletes (Covassin et al., 2018), and best coaching practices (e.g., Flett, Gould, Griffes, & Lauer, 2013). As evidenced by this list of topics, contemporary youth sport issues drive the ISYS research agenda.

The current mission of the ISYS is to provide leadership, scholarship, and outreach that transform youth sport in ways that maximize the beneficial physical, psychological, and social effects of participation for children and youth and minimize detrimental effects. This mission is achieved by focusing on four specific objectives:

- Facilitate a paradigmatic shift in the way America judges success in sports—shift from an outcome focus to a focus on educational athletics and youth development.
- Eliminate myths and enhance positive health behaviors in youth sports.
- Lead the nation in ways to develop and advance coaches and youth sport leaders.
- Be America's source of unbiased scientific and best-practice evidence on critical youth sport issues.

As evident from these topic areas, the work of the ISYS is focused on youth sport as experienced in the United States. However, the scientific agenda and general thrust of the objectives are pursued with an eye toward international, as well as national and local, impact. As outlined in the next section, the contents of this special issue address topics of wide-ranging interest and are provided by internationally known and respected youth sport scholars.

## Organization and Contents of the Special Issue

The essays in this special issue were written by the keynote speakers from our conference celebrating the 40th anniversary of the ISYS. In some instances, the papers were written in

collaboration with close colleagues. Except for the opening and closing articles of the special issue, which are more general in scope, we offered guidelines to our contributors to assist in structuring the papers. That is, contributors were encouraged to do the following in their respective papers: (a) Introduce, frame, and define the subject of the paper; (b) provide a brief history or context of the subject and related issues; (c) summarize what the current research tells us by outlining the types of studies conducted, theories employed, and key results and breakthroughs in the subject area; (d) identify future research directions; and (e) offer recommendations for best practices or policies as appropriate. Naturally, there will be variation across the papers in what is emphasized, as some areas have long-established research interest and others are emerging. Regardless of the weighting of respective paper subsections, readers will be left with an understanding of what we know about youth sport and what we need to know moving forward.

The special issue opens with an article by Daniel Gould that offers an overview of contemporary youth sport and shares examples of critical issues pertaining to physical and psychological well-being, access and structural issues, sport culture, social influence, economics, governmental and legislative issues, and the need for translational science and program-evaluation research. This sets the stage for the articles that follow, which offer greater detail on selected areas of research. The articles are generally grouped by those that address personal development through sport, health, and well-being, and social influence, respectively. It is important to state, however, that these organizational groupings are not mutually exclusive. Matters surrounding sport as a context for development of motivation, performance, and social skills, for example, are salient to health and well-being and are often entwined with interpersonal dynamics. Thus, while the articles stand alone in covering a particular area of youth sport scholarship, the collection of articles complement one another and will enable readers to acquire a well-informed and nuanced perspective on young athletes.

The first five articles address personal development of young athletes through sport. Maureen Weiss presents an overview of the past 40 years of research on youth sport motivation and participation. She shares how youth sport motivation research has evolved, detailing important theoretical perspectives guiding motivation work and evidence-based best practices, as well as how to extend motivation knowledge and make practical use of this knowledge. Chris Harwood and Sam Thrower then provide a review of psychologically based interventions for performance enhancement as applied to young athletes. They describe key clusters of research activity on this topic and offer several critical reflections and recommendations to advance both the volume and the depth of work on psychological methods and strategies for improving youth athlete performance. This is followed by an article by Dawn Anderson-Butcher focusing on the promotion of social development in youth sport participants. Anderson-Butcher overviews extant research on social- or life-skill development through sport and assesses the role of youth sport in addressing broader social problems such as poverty and inequality. Examples of community-based programs are provided that seek to achieve these aims.

The other two articles in this initial group focus on specific sport contexts as settings for personal development. Stéphanie Turgeon, Kelsey Kendellen, Sara Kramers, Scott Rathwell, and Martin Camiré address how to maximize the potential of high school sport for life-skills development. They speak to the empirical literature on both positive and negative psychosocial outcomes

of high school sport and explain how coach education can serve as a key pathway for making high school sport more developmentally impactful for young athletes. Finally, Jeffrey Martin addresses the positive and negative experiences of youth sport for those with physical and developmental disabilities. He offers an extended treatment of the concept of inspiration porn, which is imagery of successful sport or physical activity behavior by a person with a disability that is intended to inspire others. Martin reveals how this frame of reference on disability sport can serve to undermine the accrual of positive sport benefits by young athletes with disabilities. Considered together, these articles offer a broad range of perspectives on the personal development of young athletes, particularly with respect to psychological and social domains.

The next five articles focus specifically on the health and well-being of young athletes, addressing important contemporary concerns. The first of these articles, by Karin Pfeiffer and Michael Wierenga, addresses youth sport as a context for the promotion of physical activity, known to be an important health behavior across the life span. The authors overview the scant but emerging literature in two areas—the degree to which youth sport enables young people to meet daily physical activity guidelines and the potential translation of youth sport involvement to being physically active in adulthood. Next, Adam Baxter-Jones overviews factors contributing to and resulting from the physical growth and development of young athletes. Emphasized is the variability in tempo and timing of physical growth and development in young people and implications tied to sport talent development and competition matching. The paper by Tracey Covassin, Kyle Petit, and Morgan Anderson that follows offers an overview of the state of knowledge on sport-related concussions in youth sport. The authors define and share information on the epidemiology of concussion and then discuss concussion education and awareness efforts, assessment and management, recovery and return to play, and treatment approaches. Mental health is then addressed in a paper by Stewart Vella, who proposes that organized sport is a potential venue for the promotion of positive mental health outcomes, but one that requires mitigation of possible risks of youth sport involvement, such as stress, burnout, and maltreatment. He also shares information on emerging sport-based programs that show promise for the promotion of positive mental health. The last article in this group addresses maltreatment in youth sport, a matter of intensified concern in light of recent high-profile cases of athlete abuse. Gretchen Kerr, Anthony Battaglia, and Ashley Stirling make clear that athlete abuse is a systemic issue requiring concerted attention and a commitment to safe, harm-free youth sport environments. They offer reflections and recommendations that address the specific interactions of young athletes with adult authority figures (e.g., coaches), as well as organizational and sport-culture issues.

Social influence in youth sport is then addressed in three articles, the first focusing on coaches. Specifically, Thelma Horn provides an overview of knowledge about effective coach feedback to young athletes. The nature of such feedback is critical to the experiences of young athletes with respect to learning, performance, engagement, and well-being. Drawing on current theory and research, Horn presents four keys to effective feedback pertaining to content, delivery, orientation, and freedom from bias. This paper is followed by an overview of the youth sport parenting literature by Camilla Knight. Parents are much more involved in youth sports than a generation ago, and a literature has emerged on the antecedents and consequences of such involvement. Knight covers this research terrain and shares strategies for promoting high-quality parent involvement in youth sport. In the last paper of

this group, Brennan Petersen, Mark Eys, Kody Watson, and Blair Evans present a scoping review of youth sport group-dynamics research. Group contexts are ubiquitous in sport, with teammates and other social actors playing a role in youth sport experiences for individuals and teams. The review showcases group cohesion as the most frequently studied group-dynamics construct and notes that other constructs, such as cooperation, have been relatively understudied. As with the full set of papers in this special issue, the authors provide several thoughtful potential directions for future research that would advance our understanding of youth sport.

The final paper in the special issue specifically addresses three overarching research directions that could meaningfully advance our understanding of youth sport and that are likely to persist in the ever-changing landscape of youth sport. Alan Smith, Karl Erickson, and Leapetswe Maletse offer observations and selected considerations for work on positive youth development through sport, youth sport as public health, and youth sport as it evolves during the Fourth Industrial Revolution (Schwab, 2015), a period to be marked by technological advances that blur existing boundaries between the digital, physical, psychological, and social spheres. As has been the case over the past 40 years, we can expect youth sport to maintain common threads over the coming decades while also experiencing change. Thoughtful attention to the research directions provided by the authors of the papers in this special issue, along with readiness to address future changes in youth sport, will be valuable in creating developmentally sound sport experiences for young people that maximize benefits and minimize detrimental features of involvement.

## Acknowledgments and Final Thoughts

We are grateful to Maureen Weiss, former editor in chief of KR, for seeing value in this special issue and encouraging us to move forward with publishing the keynote addresses from our conference celebrating the 40th anniversary of the ISYS. She not only offered her unwavering encouragement and support but also contributed to the special issue as both author and reviewer. David Wiggins, KR's current editor in chief, has also been incredibly encouraging of our work and has personally reviewed and approved all the articles in this issue. We greatly appreciate his guidance and commitment of time and energy to the success of this project. Julia Glahn of HK, who serves as managing editor of KR, has also been an essential partner in this project. We thank her for helping with the technical details, final copyediting of manuscripts, and other tasks necessary for a polished final product.

We also extend our thanks to the talented and internationally known scholars who agreed to speak at the ISYS 40th anniversary conference and committed to contributing essays to this special issue. It is an exciting time to be doing work on youth sport because of the creativity, rigor, and commitment evidenced by this group and many others around the world. The conference was a highlight of our academic careers, and working with this group on the special issue has been incredibly gratifying. We should point out, however, that we leaned heavily on an equally impressive group of expert external reviewers. These individuals lightened our editorial load considerably and optimally challenged our authors in ways that strengthened the manuscripts. We thank this generous, talented, and committed group of experts and list their names and institutional affiliations at the end of this special issue in acknowledgment of their important contributions.

Before offering our final thoughts, we also wish to thank our colleagues and graduate students affiliated with the ISYS who

assisted in conceptualizing and executing our successful conference. We extend special thanks to Andy Driska, Christina Ebmeyer, Michelle Hatta, Darlene Howe, Jennifer Nalepa, and Emily Wright, who played critical roles leading up to, during, and after the conference. We are fortunate to have such a committed, thoughtful, and collegial team at MSU.

Although the ISYS was the first institute of its kind and played an important early role in both conducting and disseminating research on critical issues in youth sport, today many organizations and a host of sport scientists from around the world are contributing to the advancement of knowledge and practice. We are greatly encouraged by the expanded interest in youth sport as a context for developing healthy and happy young people. And, we are enthusiastic that the ISYS will continue to make contributions over the coming decades in collaboration with our partners. We hope that the ISYS 40th anniversary conference and the resulting special issue presented herein have helped clarify the state of knowledge in youth sport research, as well as where opportunity exists to make advancements that will benefit young people. We also hope that bringing many of the top youth sport researchers in the world together has created new synergy that will spur collaborations and attract new colleagues in addressing contemporary and future scientific, knowledge-translation, and practice issues in youth sport.

## References

- Covassin, T., Petit, K.M., Savage, J.L., Bretzin, A.C., Fox, M.E., Walker, L.F., & Gould, D. (2018). Sports-related concussion occurrence at various time points during high school athletic events: Part 2. *American Journal of Sports Medicine*, 46, 2270–2276. PubMed ID: 29927307 doi:10.1177/0363546518780225
- Eisenmann, J.C., Pivarnik, J.M., & Malina, R.M. (2001). Scaling peak  $\dot{V}O_2$  to body mass in young male and female distance runners. *Journal of Applied Physiology*, 90, 2172–2180. PubMed ID: 11356780 doi:10.1152/jap.2001.90.6.2172
- Feltz, D.L., Lirgg, C.D., & Albrecht, R.R. (1992). Psychological implications of competitive running in elite young distance runners: A longitudinal analysis. *The Sport Psychologist*, 6, 128–138. doi:10.1123/tsp.6.2.128
- Flett, M.R., Gould, D., Griffes, K.R., & Lauer, L. (2013). Tough love for underserved youth: A comparison of more and less effective coaching. *The Sport Psychologist*, 27, 325–337. doi:10.1123/tsp.27.4.325
- Foley, J. (1980). *Questions parents should ask about youth sports programs*. East Lansing, MI: Institute for the Study of Youth Sports, State of Michigan.
- Gould, D. (1980). *Motivating young athletes*. East Lansing, MI: Institute for the Study of Youth Sports, State of Michigan.
- Gould, D., & Weiss, M. (1980). *Teaching sports skills to young athletes*. East Lansing, MI: Institute for the Study of Youth Sports, State of Michigan.
- Howell, R.D. (1980). *Pre-season checklist for youth sport coaches*. East Lansing, MI: Institute for the Study of Youth Sports, State of Michigan.
- Joint Legislative Study Committee. (1976). *Joint legislative study on youth sports programs: Agency sponsored sports—Phase I*. Lansing, MI: State of Michigan.
- Joint Legislative Study Committee. (1978a). *Joint legislative study on youth sports programs: Agency sponsored sports—Phase II*. Lansing, MI: State of Michigan.
- Joint Legislative Study Committee. (1978b). *Joint legislative study on youth sports programs: Agency sponsored sports—Phase III*. Lansing, MI: State of Michigan.

- Lauer, L., Gould, D., Roman, N., & Pierce, M. (2010). Parental behaviors that affect junior tennis player development. *Psychology of Sport & Exercise, 11*, 487–496. doi:[10.1016/j.psychsport.2010.06.008](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2010.06.008)
- Martin, E.M., Ewing, M.E., & Oregon, E. (2017). Sport experiences of Division I collegiate athletes and their perceptions of the importance of specialization. *High Ability Studies, 28*, 149–165. doi:[10.1080/13598139.2017.1292894](https://doi.org/10.1080/13598139.2017.1292894)
- Pierce, S., Gould, D., Cowburn, I., & Driska, A. (2016). Understanding the process of psychological development in youth athletes attending an intensive wrestling camp. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health, 8*, 332–351. doi:[10.1080/2159676X.2016.1176067](https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2016.1176067)
- Schwab, K. (2015, December 12). The Fourth Industrial Revolution: What it means and how to respond. *Foreign Affairs*. Retrieved from <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2015-12-12/fourth-industrial-revolution>
- Seefeldt, V.D. (1999). History of the Institute for the Study of Youth Sports. In J.L. Haubenstricker & D.L. Feltz (Eds.), *100 years of kinesiology: History, research, and reflections* (pp. 127–143). East Lansing: Michigan State University.
- Seefeldt, V.D., & Milligan, M.J. (1992). Program for Athletic Coaches Education (PACE)—Educating America’s public & private school coaches. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance, 63*(7), 46–49. doi:[10.1080/07303084.1992.10609918](https://doi.org/10.1080/07303084.1992.10609918)
- Smoll, F.L., & Smith, R.E. (1979). *Improving relationship skills in youth sport coaches*. East Lansing, MI: Institute for the Study of Youth Sports, State of Michigan.