

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

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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.

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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