

## 2 The Science of Fun in Sport

### Fact over Fiction

*Amanda J. Visek and Anna Feiler*



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Fun. This three-letter word carries an array of beliefs about its place in sport. Among many youth sport organizations and leagues, fun is believed to be central to the sport experience and a top priority in the delivery of programming early in children's motor development and athletic skill acquisition, thus the charge to 'make it fun'. Yet, when youth athletes mature and grow in their athleticism, thereby matriculating to higher levels of competitive play, fun as a focal point and an integral part of the sporting experience drops from the foreground to the background. Once intricately tied at younger ages and earlier stages of participation, fun and athletic development are increasingly regarded as mutually exclusive at both later ages and more advanced participation stages. What is more, regardless of an athlete's age, or their athletic prowess, very often they are subjected to sweeping generalities of what is believed to make playing sport fun for them, based none other than on their biological sex and gender identity. The binary expectations of what is fun for girls and women in sport, and what is fun for boys and men in sport, are as categorically different as the meaning attached to pink versus blue. These are just some of the many (mis)conceptions about fun.

This chapter is dedicated to dispelling these and other misunderstandings of fun. It draws on a developing body of research unpacking what it really means for athletes to have fun and the place it holds for them over the lifecycle of their athletic participation (i.e. the fun ethos). Herein, we first describe the fun ethos and

the foundational research (i.e. the fun integration theory's FUN MAPS) on which it was established. Second, we forward a set of evidence-informed fun tenets, whilst dispelling prevailing misconceptions of fun. Third and finally, we provide practical recommendations, based on the current state of the scientific literature, to facilitate righting the errors of our thinking, believing, and coaching in sport.

### **The Fun Ethos**

Fun is an immediate hedonic experience marked by positive affective states described as joy, pleasure, and satisfaction. In sport, it is such a critical experience, in part, because its allure is what draws many of us to participating for the first of times and it is the defining experience that has been key to maintaining the longevity of our involvement in sport over time (see Carpenter et al., 1993; Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2008; Gardner, Magee, & Vella, 2016, 2017; Gould & Petlichkoff, 1988; Macdonald, Côté, Eys, & Deakin, 2011; Petlichkoff, 1992; Scanlan, Carpenter, Lobel, & Simons, 1993; Synder, 2014; Tuffey, Medbery, & Gould, 2006; Weinberg et al., 2000; Yungblut, Schinke, & McGannon, 2012). Thus, at its core, fun is a powerful experience that can drive the most sustaining form of motivation, that is, intrinsic motivation (see Deci & Ryan, 1987 and Ryan & Deci, 2017).

As we unveil later in the chapter, fun can be a pivotal component to motivating athletes to pursue the highest levels of sport. What, then, makes playing sport fun and how do we create and sustain these experiences? For years, a commonly held contention in sport has been that what makes playing fun for one athlete is nearly guaranteed to be different than what drives fun for another athlete. In other words, what is fun for one person has been regarded as distinctively unique as their psychological makeup and independent lived experiences. As individuals, by definition, we are considered discrete idiosyncratic persons separate from one another. This begs the question: is what makes playing sport fun for you all that different

than what makes playing sport fun for us? Could there be universal tenets for what makes playing sport fun for all of us?

An emergent area of sport science research, the FUN MAPS, which have given rise to the data-informed fun integration theory and fun ethos, engaged youth athletes as expert informants to answer these very questions (e.g. Visek et al., 2015, 2020a, b). Based on the science conducted so far, among the most key findings has been the discovery that what makes playing sport fun may be far more universally similar among athletes (i.e. the fun ethos) than it is fundamentally different. Thus, the belief that fun is highly variable from athlete to athlete appears to be more fiction rather than fact.

Foundationally, fun, in sport, is an experience demarcated by 11 fun-factors (i.e. *Trying Hard* [e.g. trying your best, working hard, staying active, competing], *Positive Team Dynamics* [e.g. playing well together, supporting teammates], *Positive Coaching* [e.g. having knowledge of the sport, being encouraging, allowing mistakes while staying positive, giving clear consistent communication], *Learning and Improving* [e.g. being challenged, learning from mistakes, improving skills to play at the next level], *Games* [e.g. getting playing time, playing against an evenly matched team], *Practice* [e.g. having well-organized sessions, getting water breaks, including a variety of activities], *Team Friendships* [e.g. getting along with teammates, being part of team year after year], *Mental Bonuses* [e.g. keeping a positive attitude, winning], *Game Time Support* [e.g. having a referee that makes consistent calls, parents showing good sportsmanship], *Team Rituals* [e.g. showing team spirit; high-fiving, fist-bumping], and *Swag* [e.g. having quality gear and equipment, earning medals, wearing a cool uniform]), collectively comprised of 81 fun-determinants; select determinants are provided above in brackets for illustrative purposes – see Visek et al., 2015 for a full review of the fun integration theory's FUN MAPS and complete list of fun-determinants within each fun-factor. The fun ethos include a set of

tenets that have evolved based on the developing research that has informed our current understanding of fun in sport, and amid doing so, dispels common misconceptions that have held permanence in sport, namely, that: (a) what is fun for female athletes is different than male athletes, (b) what is fun for older athletes is categorically different from younger athletes, and (c) the fun priorities of competitive sport athletes are radically different from recreational sport athletes. Next, we present the three evidence-informed tenets that have the potential to shift coaching in ways that optimize fun for all athletes.

## Fun Tenets

### ***The Fun Priorities of Athletes are Uniformly Similar, Regardless of Sex/Gender***

Most recently, when investigating the fun priorities of athletes, a secondary-analysis study of the FUN MAPS by Visek et al. (2020b) found that girls and boys responded in remarkably similar ways. Among the top fun-factors for boys was *Trying Hard*, *Positive Team Dynamics*, and *Positive Coaching*, followed secondarily by *Learning and Improving*, *Games*, *Practice*, *Team Friendships*, *Mental Bonuses*, and *Game Time Support*. Of lesser importance were *Team Rituals* and *Swag*. For girls, the findings were the same. The results of this study, along with a large and established body of evidence in developmental psychology, neuroscience, and even behavioural neuroendocrinology continue to challenge sex- and gender-based binary beliefs and expectations (see Hyde et al., 2019 for further reading). The idea that females and males, or girls and boys, are so different from one another, and that these differences transcend most spheres of life (see Jones, 1990), including sport, is what has been termed the *gender differences hypothesis*. Overwhelmingly though, research has and continues to support the *gender similarities hypothesis* that posits females and males are comparably more similar than they are different. Despite an

abundance of scientific support for the gender similarities hypothesis, what triumphs mainstream thinking, believing, and being, is the gender differences hypothesis.

For example, females are, and have been historically, characterized by gender stereotypes and sociocultural milieus which define them, in large, by their need for social relatedness. Thus, in sport, beliefs about what makes playing sport fun for them tends to centre around the quality of the relationships they have formed and the nature of their interpersonal dynamics with teammates. This is easily seen through internet search engines. Enter the terms *girls* or *women* or *female* with *sport* and *fun* and the images yielded are primarily of them huddled together, giggling, hugging one another, sitting arm-in-arm on the bench smiling, or celebrating together jumping up and down in unison. Conduct the same internet image search using the terms *boys* or *men* or *male* followed by *sport* and *fun* and the results are remarkably different. Boys and men are seen racing to the ball, battling for the puck, colliding, kicking hard, and challenging their opponents – images which exemplify beliefs that what makes playing sport fun for boys and men are related to being competitive, mastering skills, and achieving. More recently, we have begun to see images of girls and women that capture their athleticism; however, the images that define girls and women in sport (e.g. bonding with one another on the side-line), compared to boys and men in sport (e.g. competing), are still more disparate than they are similar.

When it comes to understanding how we are more similar than different, self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2017), one of the most comprehensive and scientifically supported theories of motivation, posits there are three basic, universal psychological needs among all of us: (a) the need for autonomy (i.e. self-determination), (b) competence (i.e. mastery), and (c) social relatedness (i.e. interactions and relationships with others). Thus, if what drives motivation is more

common than it is different, perhaps what makes playing sport fun is also more commonplace than it is different. In an empirical attempt to unveil the priorities of athletes when it comes to fun, Visek et al.'s (2020b) study observed *Trying Hard*, *Positive Team Dynamics*, and *Positive Coaching* were of top priority for both girls and boys; and in parallel with self-determination theory, close examination of the determinants that define the three aforementioned fun-factors exemplify our psychological need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, respectively.

Further comparative analysis by Visek et al. also indicated girls and boys rated the importance of approximately 93% of the 81 fun-determinants similarly. Meaning, they did not vary in how they rated the importance of determinants such as *trying your best*, *working hard*, *being active*, *getting playing time*, *being challenged*, *getting touches on the ball*, *learning from mistakes*, and *playing well* (see Visek et al., 2020b for full comparison review). Yet, despite the mounted evidence across numerous disciplines of science that support the gender similarities hypothesis, including sport science, the gender differences hypothesis – that is more fiction than it is fact – continues to be the generally accepted 'truth'. This, in turn, perpetuates the sociocultural and gender stereotypes that reinforce errors in our thinking that lead to false ideas and disparate ways in which girls and boys, and women and men, are coached.

### ***The Fun Priorities of Athletes are Consistently the Same Across Age***

The same study that refuted long-held ideas of what is most fun for girls versus boys (e.g. Visek et al., 2020b), also found the fun priorities of older athletes (i.e. U14–U19) to be extraordinarily like those of younger athletes (i.e. U9–U13). Moreover, the relative order by which older athletes and younger athletes rated, and thus ranked, the importance of the fun-factors mirrored the results observed between girls and boys; that is, *Trying Hard*, *Positive Team Dynamics*, and *Positive Coaching* were among the factors of primary importance, followed by *Learning and Improving*,

*Games, Practice, Team Friendships, Mental Bonuses, and Game Time Support* which observed slight variances in rank order but were statistically found to be insignificant, and lastly *Team Rituals* and *Swag* holding importance, though less in comparison to the other nine fun-factors. When thoughtfully considering and calibrating what is fun for child athletes earlier in their sport participation years, evidence would suggest the same holds true for adolescent athletes. Additional research is needed to corroborate these findings to definitively conclude that fun is not implicated by biological age. Yet, the lack of age-related effects observed in the research, so far, aligns with the findings previously discussed regarding sex biology (i.e. females compared to males) and gender identity (i.e. girls compared to boys).

### ***The Fun Priorities of Elite Athletes Mirror those of Recreational Athletes***

When discussing fun in the context of the available sport options for young athletes, the word 'fun' finds itself holding multiple meanings entangled within one another. On the one hand, fun is regarded as a vital component of any athlete's experience because it maintains their involvement in sport (e.g. Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2008; Gardner, Magee, & Vella, 2016, 2017; Gould & Petlichkoff, 1988; Snyder, 2014) and its absence is commonly known and empirically supported as the leading reason why athletes leave sport (e.g. Armentrout & Kamphoff, 2011; Durant et al., 1991; Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2008; Gardner, Magee, & Vella, 2017; Petlichkoff, 1992; Weiss & Williams, 2004). Despite the essentialness of sport being a fun experience, the word takes on new, and at times, not so welcomed meaning, particularly in the context of discussions regarding its place in sport relative to athletes' level of play. For example, recreational sport is often touted 'for fun', whereas competitive sport is seen as 'for advancement'. Thus, the grassroots rec or house leagues are where athletes go to 'have fun' and the select travel and Olympic development programs are where they go to 'get to

the next level'. The selection of one inherently implies an absence of the other (Martin, 2015) and this is especially apparent in organized sport (Visek et al., 2020b) where fun is not consistently viewed in our work-oriented and economics-based society as congruent with performance and higher-level sport (Bengoechea, Streat, & Williams, 2004; Henderson, Glancy, & Little, 1999; Visek et al., 2018, 2020b). Instead, fun can hold a negative connotation, and thus it is something to be feared and avoided (West, 2018) or only bestowed upon athletes as a reward at the end of practice for working hard or as a break from intense training when coaches let the athletes, finally, 'have some fun' (Bengoechea, Streat, & Williams, 2004).

In these contexts, fun is seen as a carefreeness (Ryan & Huta, 2009) akin to child's play defined by goofing off and fooling around, not paying attention or being on task, and generally slacking off and not playing hard. As such, it is associated with undermining athletic development (Bengoechea, Streat, & Williams, 2004; Visek et al., 2018; West, 2018), whereas the research conducted by Visek et al. (2015, 2020a, b) who engaged youth athletes in identifying all that is fun when playing organized sport tells a different story – that at the heart of fun is athletic development. A retrospective study of Olympians from across two quadrennia investigated (a) what motivated Olympians to get involved in sport early in their development and (b) what drove them to pursue the pinnacle of their sport. Findings indicated fun was a consistent factor in both the initiation and continued persistence to achieve the highest level possible (Snyder, 2014). Indeed, the results from this study underscore the significance of fun across the lifecycle of Olympians' participation, development, and performance in sport, and the findings from Visek et al. work highlight its role in the development of youth. Together, evidence suggests fun is a critical component at all stages of athletic development and can be considered a requisite element in developing elite and even Olympic

athletes (Lundqvist & Sandin, 2014).

Additionally, in the same study that Visek et al. (2020) conducted a comparative analysis of the fun priorities of girls and boys, and younger and older athletes; they also compared recreational sport athletes and travel sport athletes. Based on the research shared herein, so far, it comes as no surprise that the fun priorities of travel sport athletes were remarkably like those of recreational youth athletes with no defining significant differences apart from 5 of the 81 fun-determinants that would be expected to play a more important role in the fun experiences of elite youth travel athletes. These included *practicing with specialty trainers/coaches*, *going to sports camps*, *staying in hotels for games and tournaments*, *traveling to new places to play*, and *playing in tournaments*. In fact, recreational athletes and travel athletes rated 94% of the 81 fun-determinants similarly regarding their degree of importance. Like the sex and age comparisons conducted, *Trying Hard*, *Positive Team Dynamics*, and *Positive Coaching* were of primary importance among both recreational and travel athletes, followed by *Learning and Improving*, *Practice*, *Games*, *Team Friendships*, *Game Time Support*, and *Mental Bonuses* of secondary importance and, finally, *Team Rituals* and *Swag* rounded out the factors of tertiary importance.

### **What Predisposes Misconceptions of Fun in Sport?**

Unbeknownst to us on a conscious level, the sheer structure by which sport is organized leads us to errors in our thinking, which are the result of the ways in which we classify athletes into what are most often a binary sport classification system (e.g. sex [female or male], age [younger or older; U9–U19], level of play [recreational or select/elite]). Based on categorizing people on an identified trait, ideas about them based on that trait are preserved, including prejudices and stereotypes (Bigler & Liben, 2006, 2007) – and sport is wrought with categorization. Early in

their participation, young athletes are sorted by their most salient biological traits (i.e. sex, age) and soon thereafter they are further sorted by their athletic traits (i.e. skill, playing level), and this carries on throughout their sporting years. Sorting them into binary ‘this’ versus ‘that’ implies both the presence and absence of one thing versus the other. According to Kahneman (2011), this is a result of the intuitively fast ways in which we think, which are based on existing schemas and biases we hold that can result in errors in our thinking. Indeed, sport’s binary categorization system, and the ways in which the meaning of fun morphs and inverts depending on the context in which it is used (e.g. fun = goofing off, fun = key to athletic development), has contributed to misunderstanding of its meaning, and the misconceptions we hold about it for athletes based on traits such as sex/gender, age, and playing level.

### **Coaching Recommendations**

Below are recommendations that align coaching practices with what it really means for athletes to have fun playing sport congruent with the state of the science:

- Make fun a focal point for all athletes’ development in sport; it is critical to maintaining long-term participation as well as furthering athletic advancement.
- Remember that fun is not happenstance or coincidental, it must be fostered with intent to evoke the experience athletes describe as fun.
- Become familiar with the fun integration theory’s 11 fun-factors and the 81 fun-determinants that define the factors; integrate them into practices/training sessions and competitive games.
- Shift binary-based coaching (e.g. sex/gender, age, playing level) that creates bias towards emphasizing differences to coaching approaches that recognize and appreciate the universality of athletes’ fun-determinants and priority needs.

- For further reading on integrating fun in coaching practices, see Visek et al. (2018) and Arvinen-Barrow, Visek, & Barrow (2020).

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