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Participation patterns in Swedish youth sport. A longitudinal study of participants aged 10-19 years

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Abstract

In Sweden almost everyone participate in youth sport at one time or another. In recent years, however, overall participation rates have declined and many stop early. The aspiration of the sport confederation as well as the Swedish state is that young people should stay longer in sport which raises questions about participation patterns during adolescence, the ease of joining a sport club, and the barriers to remaining a participant. Drawing on a nine-year longitudinal study, this article reports on the participation patterns among a group of 241 youth that were followed from 10 to 19 years. They took part in four surveys (when they were 10, 13, 16 and 19 years of age). The results show a clear polarisation, one fourth did not take part at all or had only participated for a short time, one fourth participated all the time from the age of 10 to 19. Few started after the age of 10. The pathways for those continuing were characterised by diversification and not specialisation.

Keywords: club sport, sports participation, youth, longitudinal.

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While youth sport primarily takes place within schools in countries such as the USA, Canada and England, voluntary sports clubs have an important role in this respect in the Scandinavian countries (Seippel, Ibsen & Norberg 2010). In Sweden there are some 20,000 sports clubs throughout the country and 12,000 of those organize youth sports. Almost all children and young people, or at least over 80 percent, are participating in a sports club at one time or another during their youth (Trondman, 2005). In recent years, however, overall participation rates have declined (Norberg, 2016) and many stop participating in their teenage years. Indeed, dropping out of sport is an international trend (Coakley, 2003; Coakley & Pike, 2009; Findlay, Garner & Kohen, 2009; Pilgaard, 2012; Scheerder et al., 2006; Seabra, et al., 2007).

Participation in youth sport clubs in Sweden is often portrayed as a representing a triangle; it has a broad base with many participants, but which over time tapers to a narrow top with only a few elite athletes remaining. The Swedish Sports Confederation (RF), which is the umbrella organization for approximately 70 federations and their associated local clubs however, declares in its strategy for Swedish sport 2025, that as many people as possible should have the opportunity to continue in a sport club as long as they want regardless of age, ambitions and abilities (Riksidrottsförbundet, 2016). This means that the triangular nature of current participation should change to become more of a rectangle with as many participants at the bottom as at the top. This aspiration or vision to make young people stay longer in sport raises questions about participation patterns during adolescence, the ease of joining a sport club when young, and the barriers to remaining a participant. Drawing on a nine-year longitudinal study, this article reports on the participation patterns among a group of 241 youth that were followed from 10 to 19 years. The central questions of the study include: what are the proportions of participants amongst the studied group of girls and boys at the ages of 10, 13, 16 and 19? How many

sports do they take part in at these different ages? How many start with one sport and continue with the same sport over the years? How many are still participating at 19 and what characterize their participation? By illuminating patterns and pathways we hope to provide knowledge that is useful to stakeholders in their attempts to encourage youth to stay in sports longer, i.e. in making the participation pattern resemble a rectangle instead of a triangle.

From policy to practice

Most organised sports activities are found in RF-associated sports clubs. RF is an independent non-government organisation, but it is dependent on public financial support. According to the sport policy of the state the reason to support RF is that sport participation is supposed to promote healthy citizens, integration, and sense of fair play and good ethics (The Swedish Government, 2017). The relationship between RF and the Swedish state is strong and it is based on a mutual belief that the sports movement delivers what the state wants. Norberg (2004) describes this agreement as an implicit contract. In that sense it has been part of the development of the welfare state and Swedish welfare policy since the beginning of the 20th century. In return for the provided funding, it is expected that sports will be accessible to everyone who wants to participate (Bergsgard & Norberg, 2010; Riksidrottsförbundet, 2009; The Swedish Government, 2016). During the last decade the support from the state has increased considerably, and the Swedish Government has allocated money directly to local clubs organizing youth sport (SOU 2008:59; The Swedish Government, 2016).[5] The call has been clear from the Government to the clubs: work to make more youth participate and encourage those already participating to remain (The Swedish Government, 2016). So, on a policy level, from the

[5] In 2006 the financial support reached 1,546 million SEK. In 2016 it had increased to 2069 million SEK, of which 1196 million should go to youth club sports (Norberg, 2016, p. 17).

government's side as well as from the Swedish sport federation's side, the ambition is to make young people remain in sport.

However, youth sport practice is not always in line with the intentions of the overall policy. Sport for all, illustrated by the metaphor of making a triangle become a rectangle, may be difficult to accomplish for a number of reasons. Several researchers have pointed out that different and partly conflicting logics dominate sport activities. Stenling and Fahlén (2009), for example, have identified three dominant logics of Swedish sport: the sport for all logic, the result-oriented logic, and the commercialization/professionalization logic. According to Peterson (2008) the social practice that constitutes youth sport is conditioned by what he calls the coach's double assignment: democratic fostering and competition fostering. Democratic fostering originates from society and is the reason behind the strong social support of youth sport. The aim is to promote democratic forms of social life based on respect, equality and openness, and the basic idea is to include everyone who wants to take part in sport and enable them to develop according to their own abilities. In contrast, according to Peterson (2008), competition fostering originates from the sport itself and it controls the internal logic of its activities. Competition fostering is about developing good athletes and teaching young people how to deal with the winning or losing of competitions. It is also about learning the importance of training and sportsmanship. Competition fostering leads to ranking and selection, since the goal is to create as successful an athlete as possible.

Even though democratic fostering and competition fostering do not need to be mutually exclusive, youth sport is characterised by these partly conflicting objectives. Coaches have to balance the aims of society to include all kids as well as to fulfil the objectives of sport, i.e. to develop as many good athletes as possible. However, studies suggest that competition fostering and early talent

selection seem to dominate youth sport in Sweden (Engström, 2008; Peterson, 2008; Redelius & Larsson, 2016) as well as in many other western countries (see for example Fraser-Thomas, Côté & Derkin, 2008; Green, 2006). Skille (2011), for example, has found that Norwegian sport clubs' mainly are concerned with factors related to achievement: to provide sport development for athletes with ambitions and to educate coaches and leaders.

The theoretical consideration for this study is thus that the sporting practice is not always in line with policy since practice is governed by logics that do not align with the ambitions stated in central policies. For this study this means that participation in youth sport is conditioned by conflicting ideas that we believe will impact on the patterns and pathways.

A longitudinal design

Many studies of youth sport participation are cross-sectional (Borgers, Seghers & Scheerder, 2016; Laakso et al., 2008; Larsson, 2008; Pratt, Macera & Blanton 1999; Seabra, et al., 2007; Scheerder et al., 2006; Van Tuyckom, Scheerder & Bracke, 2010) and only a few have focused on the extent and experience of sport participation by following the same group from childhood to the late teens (i.e. Borgers, Seghers & Scheerder, 2016, Pilgaard, 2012; Wagnsson, 2009). Fraser-Thomas, Côté & Deakin (2008) suggest that longitudinal data is needed to expand knowledge about the patterns and pathways of youth sport development over time. Inspired by previous research on youth sport and the mutual goal of RF and the Swedish Government to make more young people participate longer, this paper addresses issues about participation during adolescence. Accordingly, this study analysed participation patterns, i.e. the extent and experience of youth sport that the same group of young people have over a nine-year period.

Sample selection

The study draws on data from 241 boys and girls (n = 124 girls and n = 117 boys) who took part in four different surveys. These surveys are part of a large multidisciplinary study of a nationwide sample of school students that was conducted at the Swedish School of Sport and Health Sciences in Stockholm. Students from a randomly selected survey of 48 schools were chosen as a representative sample based on age and gender in school year three (Engström, 2004). The study started when the students were 10 years old and continued when they were 13, 16 and 19 years of age. In the first data collection 585 out of 642 ten-year-old students participated (91%). The remaining students (n = 344) only participated on one, two or three occasions and were therefore excluded, since the aim is to analyse the patterns of the same group of respondents over a nine year period.

The dropout analysis (chi-square test), where the responses from the students who participated in the study on all four occasions were compared with those who did not, showed no significant differences regarding involvement in sports clubs and the extent of sporting and physical activity ($p < 0.05$). The dropout analysis between those who were excluded and those who answered on all four occasions showed that the data being drawn on can be considered robust (Gratton & Jones, 2010). However, 10 percent more girls than boys participated in the survey on all four occasions.

The Questionnaire

All the students responded to the same standardised questionnaire, which was created and checked by a team of researchers for validity (Brun Sundblad, 2006; Ekblom, 2005; Engström, 2004). A reliability test (test–retest performed within a space of 2 weeks) of the questionnaire was carried out with a class of 16-year-

old students, from which a correlation of 0.87 was obtained with regard to the key issue of club sport participation (Gratton & Jones, 2010). The questionnaire items of interest in this study relate to various aspects of participation in club sports. Club sport participants were defined as those who actively participated in a club sport. The question: *Do you regularly participate in a sport club?* required a *yes* or *no* answer. The respondents were asked to write down which sport(s) they participated in, how many times a week and how many months a year. Participation once a week was enough to be regarded as a participant. The respondents' answers to this question in each survey (at the age of 10 in 2001, the age of 13 in 2004, the age of 16 in 2007 and the age of 19 in 2010) were combined to define them as participants or non-participants. The answers to the questions in each survey were also combined and defined as experiences of club sport:

- One occasion is regarded as having *'short experience'* i.e. the respondent answered that she/he participated regularly in sports club(s) in one of the four surveys.
- Two occasions is regarded as having *'some experience'*.
- Three occasions is regarded as having *'long experience'*.
- Four occasions is regarded as having *'very long experience'*.
- No participation on any occasion is regarded as having *'no experience'*.

Whether the respondents participated in competitions, games or matches or solely were taking on a recreational level was investigated by the question: *Do you compete in a sport club?* The participants answered this question separately for each listed sport.

In order to explore sports club participation over the school age years and gain a deeper understanding of the participation patterns in the different sports and young people's paths in sports clubs, each one of the 241 questionnaires was

analysed by following each respondent's answer to each survey over the years. This enabled us to describe every individual's path in sports clubs over a nine-year period. For example, if the respondents participated at the age of 10, 13, 16 and/or 19, we were able to establish which sport(s) they participated in, whether they took part in competitions or not and whether they had long interruptions and/or started again. For validity reasons, the participants were also asked to retrospectively look back and answer questions of sport participation during their upbringing when the respondents were 19 years of age.

Before the study began, parental permission was obtained and ethical guidelines were followed (Vetenskapsrådet, 2002). Each study was approved by the Ethical Committee at the Karolinska Institute, Stockholm (Ref.no.00-416).

Statistical Analysis

The questionnaires were converted into a database using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS 21.0, Chicago, IL, USA) computer software. By way of quality control, the questionnaires were re-read and compared with databases to achieve the highest possible level of accuracy. In order to determine whether there were any differences between participants and non-participants in club sport regarding gender and age, a chi-square was used to examine group differences, with the following levels of statistical significance: $p < 0.05$. $p<0.01$, $p<0.001$.

Results

The proportion of participants in youth sport in the studied group (n=241) when they were aged 10, 13, 16 and 19 is presented in Figure 1.

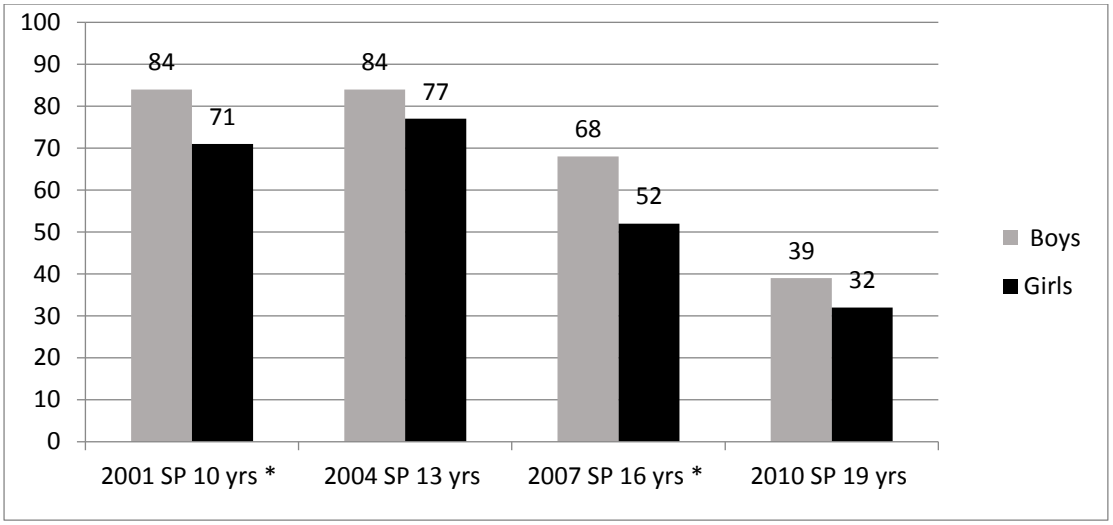

Figure 1. Percentage of youth who were sports club participants (SP) n=241 at the ages of 10, 13, 16, and 19, boys and girls, $p < 0.05$ (*).

Most of the boys (84%, 84% and 68%) and girls (71%, 77 % and 52%) participated in a sport club at the ages of 10, 13 and 16. There were no significant differences between girls and boys at the ages of 13 and 19, but there were significant differences ($p < 0.05$) at the ages of 10 and 16. Sports club participation patterns were similar between boys and girls, with the exception that girls tended to start somewhat later and drop out slightly earlier than boys. After the age of 13 the participation rate decreased. At the age of 19, more than half of those who had participated at the age of 10 had dropped out. The participation pattern in this group is thus resembling a triangle rather than a rectangle.

Experience of Sports Club Participation

Research about Swedish youth sport reveals that almost 90 percent of children have participated at one time or another but there is no knowledge about the length of this participation (Trondman, 2005). This study examined how long the respondents were involved in a sport club by combining the answers to the question *Do you regularly participate in a sport club?* in each survey. The

constructed categories are: ‘no experience’, ‘short experience’, ‘some experience’, ‘long experience’ and ‘very long experience’ (see Figure 2).

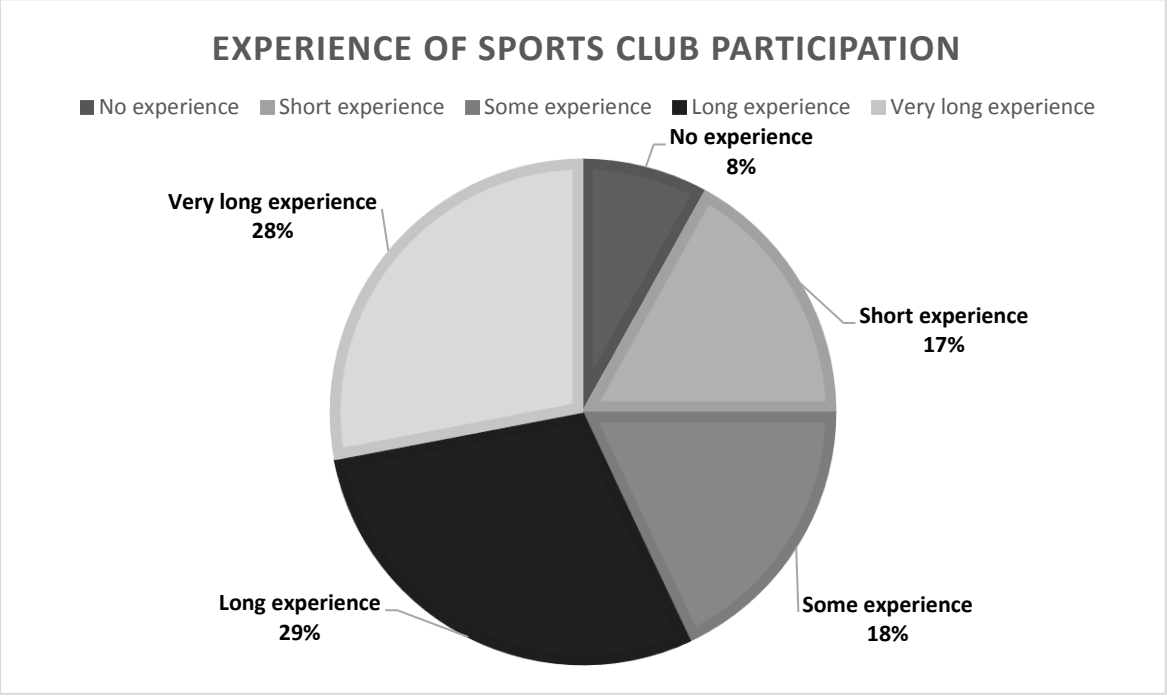

Figure 2. Sport club experience (n = 241). Percentages based on information from answers from all four surveys.

A small proportion (8%) did not take part in sports clubs at all. A slightly larger proportion (17%) participated at some time between the ages of 10 and 19 and were therefore regarded as having ‘short experience’. Twenty-eight percent had participated from the ages 10 to 19 and had ‘very long experience’. Among the whole group we can therefore conclude that around one fourth did not take part at all or took part a short time, around half of the group took part during at least six years, and around one fourth took part all the time from the age of 10 to the age of 19.

Experiences of Different Sports

In Figure 3, the respondents’ experiences of regularly taking part in different sports are presented.

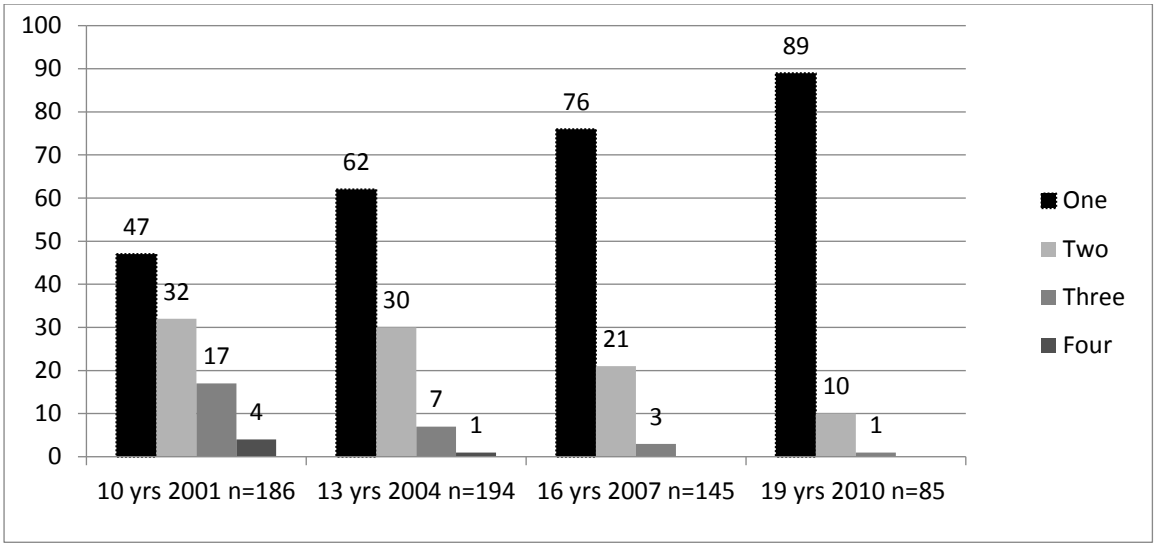

Figure 3. Number of sports that the participants took part in at different ages, in percentages (n=222).

Amongst the 10-year-olds, over 50 percent took part in at least two different sports. Many participated in three or four sports. As the participants grew older, the number pf participants that practised more than one sport decreased. At 13 years of age, however, there were still almost 40 percent that took part in at least two sports and at 16 that was the case for almost 25 percent of those involved in youth sport.

As it was possible to follow and trace each individual respondent, we examined how many sports each respondent was engaged in at the time of each survey and what the patterns and pathways were. Of those who had participated in youth sport over a very long time (on all four survey occasions), 53 percent had participated regularly in three sports or more, compared to 25 percent of those who had participated for a long time (on three survey occasions). This means that those with a very long experience of youth sports regularly practised more than one sport to a greater extent than those who stopped earlier.

Competitive or recreational youth sport

Most children and youth are active in sport because it is fun, they learn new skills and can be with their friends (Thedin Jakobsson, 2014; McPhail, Gorely & Kirk, 2003). However, the dominant logic in many sports, both individual and team sports, is based on competition and ranking, (see for example Peterson, 2008; Stenling & Fahlen, 2009).

In Figure 4, the proportion of participants taking part in sport competitions at specified ages is presented.

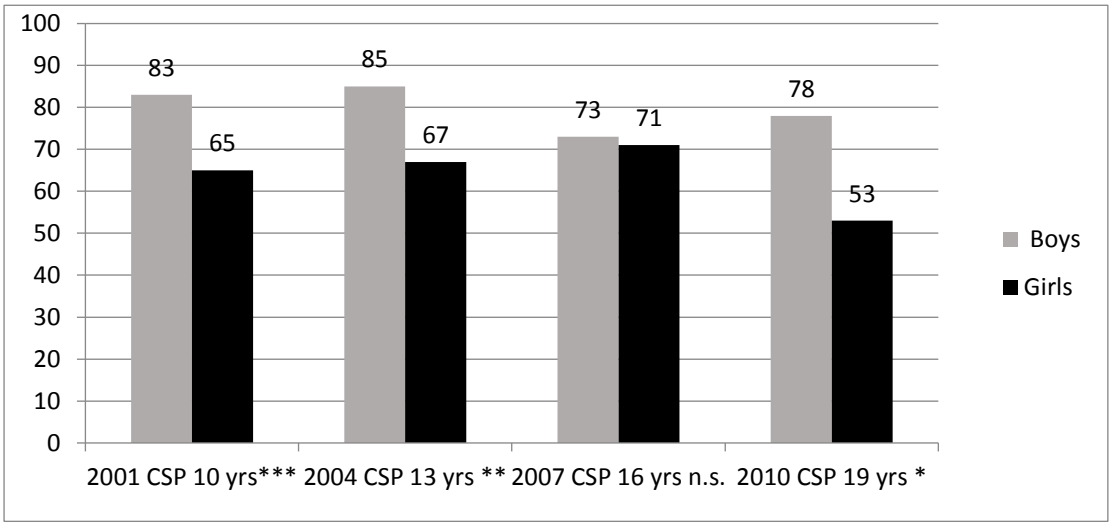

Figure 4. Percentage of participants taking part in competitions (CSP) n=222, at the age of 10, 13, 16 and 19, boys and girls, $p < 0.05$ (*), $p<0.01$ (**), $p<0.001$ (***).

Two out of three girls took part in competitions at the age of 10, 13 and 16. Amongst the girls, it was most common to be a competitor at the age of 16 and amongst the boys at 10. Significantly, more boys than girls participated in sport(s) competitions at the ages of 10 ($p<0.001$), 13 ($p<0.01$) and 19 ($p < 0.05$). An analysis was conducted by following each individual club sport path over the years. This analysis showed no difference amongst boys and girls who

participated in football, floorball and handball. Competitions, games and matches were common in these sports, regardless of gender. This shows that competition and ranking is a vital part of youth sport. Importantly, more girls than boys, participated in sports in which it is possible to participate without competitions, e.g. equestrian sport. In the next section, we highlight some possible consequences of this trend when looking at the participation patterns of girls and boys in different sports.

Participation Patterns in Different Sports

Studying the participation patterns and pathways in sport is complex. Although the number of participants is small, we will pay attention to some of the characteristics of the patterns for the studied group. In each of the surveys the respondents reported all the various sports they were engaged in, which made it possible to determine the participation patterns over the years. Table 1 shows all the different sports the participants were doing at 10, 13, 16 and 19 years of age. It should be noted that the respondents may have taken part in more than one sport.

Table 1. Number of participants among the 222 girls and boys who took part in different sports when they were 10, 13, 16 and 19 years. Listed in the order of most participation numbers at the age of 10.

Sports	Girls age 10 n= 88	Boys age 10 n= 98	Girls age 13 n= 96	Boys age 13 n= 98	Girls age 16 n= 65	Boys age 16 n= 80	Girls age 19 n= 39	Boys age 19 n= 46
Football	33	74	41	58	18	34	7	25
Equestrian	29	3	29	0	20	0	14	0
Floorball	3	21	9	15	4	16	5	3
Gymnastics	20	0	7	0	3	0	2	0
Ice hockey	2	16	2	20	0	11	0	2
Skiing	10	6	5	5	6	5	2	1
Table-t.	4	11	1	4	1	5	0	0
Handball	7	7	4	7	4	8	0	3
Swimming	8	6	3	2	3	0	0	0
Tennis	9	5	5	6	1	4	0	0
Basketball	7	0	7	3	2	0	0	0
Bowling	4	3	0	2	0	0	0	0
Golf	2	5	2	6	0	5	1	4
Mart. arts	2	5	2	6	4	8	1	2
Athletics	5	1	4	4	1	4	2	3
Shooting	0	5	1	1	0	1	0	1
Motorsp.	0	3	0	1	0	2	0	2
Orienteer.	2	1	2	0	2	0	1	0
Wrestling	1	2	0	2	1	1	0	1
Badminton	0	2	1	1	0	2	1	1
Figure skat.	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	0
Volleyball	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	0
Boxing	0	0	0	0	2	1	2	2
Rugby	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	1
Total	150	176	128	144	73	108	39	51

The in- and out flow of participants in different sports varied over the years. Some sports lost many participants (eg. swimming, table tennis and tennis), while others gained members. Martial arts, rugby, athletics and boxing are examples of sports that attracted participants when they were older. Football was clearly the largest sport amongst both boys and girls, but the outflow was

also large: football lost over 65 percent of the boys and over 80 percent of the girls who had previously played.

At the time of the study, 69 different sports were represented in RF. The respondents were active in 24 of these sports at least once. Fourteen of the sports had 10 or fewer participants amongst all the respondents. The youngest girls (aged 10) primarily participated in football, equestrian sport, gymnastics, skiing, tennis, swimming, handball and basketball. Amongst the boys of the same age, football was the most popular sport. This was followed by floorball, ice hockey, table tennis, handball, swimming and skiing. Among the 19-year-olds, a few sports dominated, such as football among the boys and equestrian sport among the girls. Although the numbers are small, our assumption is that this finding is not a coincidence but rather reflects the logics dominating youth sport. In football one can play on different levels which means that it is possible to continue without having elite ambitions. In tennis and swimming, for example, this is seldom the case in Swedish youth sport. In equestrian sport most girls who are taking part do not compete. This is not to say that there are no competitions, or that the participants do not want to compete, but only few are able to, since there are considerable financial costs incurred if one is to compete.

P**atterns and Pathways of those Participating at 19**

At 19 years of age, 35 percent of the studied group (or 85 individuals) was still participating in youth sport. As mentioned before it was possible to follow and trace each individual respondent and we have examined how many sports each respondent was participating in at each survey and what patterns and pathways could be found in the survey group with special focus among those that had continued. The majority (94%) of the remaining participants started before the

age of 10. Many changed sports, but nobody stopped for a longer period and then started again.

The majority participated in different sports regularly over the years. Over half of the group (55%) practised the same sports, but only a small group (11%) specialised and played one sport constantly from 10 to 19 years of age. Many (45%) started after the age 10 or later with the sport they were still practising at 19. In fact, almost one out of five (19%) started at the age of 16 or later with the sport they were still engaged in at 19.

In short, the results show that in this group there is almost no inflow, after the age of 10, in other words there is almost no inflow of beginners without previous sport club experience. The inflow is from those who were already participating and changed sports rather than from those who started doing sports after the age of 10.

Summary of the results

Before we turn to the discussion section we will summarize the most important results.

- The participation pattern in the studied group resembled a triangle – most participated when they were 10 or 13 and then the numbers decreased.
- Over 90 percent took part at one time or another, but three distinct groups could be identified: 1) around one fourth did not participate at all or only a short time, 2) around half of the group participated three to six years, and 3) around one fourth participated in youth sport all the time from 10 to 19 years of age.
- Very few started after aged 10 but once a participant it was possible to change sports and start with a new one.

- A little more than 50 percent held on to the same sport from 10 to 19 of age but practiced other sports as well.
- Around 10 percent specialized in the sense that they practiced only one and the same sport all the time from 10 to 19 years of age.
- Those remaining in sport the longest took part in several different sports to a greater extent than those who dropped out.
- Football among boys and girls and equestrian sport among girls are the sports that most were still involved in at 19. Those sports are not dominated solely by the logic of competition and ranking.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to describe the participation patterns and pathways in youth sport amongst the same group of young people over a nine year period when they were 10, 13, 16, and 19 years of age. It was also to investigate some characteristics of those still participating at the age of 19. Identifying patterns of participation is particularly important in the light of the recent RF and Swedish Government strategies to include more young people in sports (Riksidrottsförbundet, 2016; The Swedish Government, 2016). Even though the study focuses on a group of Swedish youth, the results will hopefully also be valuable for an international audience, since it focuses on increasing our understanding of what is required to remain in youth sport. Such understanding is particularly needed today when many countries try to increase the activity levels of children and adolescents (Kirk, 2005; Smith & Biddle, 2008; WHO, 2010) and develop sustainable youth sport programmes (Vierimaa, Erickson & Côté, 2016).

The Polarisation of Participation

In general, the results relating to participation and dropout rates are in line with those of other studies (see for example Scheerder et al., 2006). More than 90

percent of the boys and girls in the study participated in youth sport some time or another. However, the results show a clear polarisation in the group: 25 percent did not take part at all or only participated for a short time, while around the same proportion participated all the time from (at least) the age of 10 to 19. For some, participation in youth sport is obviously a large part of their upbringing, whereas for others it is not. The context of sports clubs attracts many people and, although almost all start, in the long run, few remain. In the next section we will elaborate on why this is the case.

The Logic of Youth Sport is a Barrier

Accessibility of youth sport clearly appears to be limited after a certain age. The results indicate that youth sport is either not attractive enough, or that it is too difficult to start after the age of 10. One interpretation is that youth sport is primarily focusing on competition fostering in which the main logic is to develop elite athletes (Peterson, 2008; Stenling & Fahlen 2009). Democratic fostering, with the basic idea of including everyone who wants to engage in sport and enabling them to develop according to their own abilities, thus seems to be in the shadow of competitive fostering. In this sense, youth sport appears to be open for those who get involved at an early age and have the right dispositions for participation (Thedin Jakobsson, Lundvall, Redelius, Engström 2012; Engström, 2008; Scheerder, et al., 2006; Skille, 2005).

Pathways for Long Participation

Specialisation in terms of only doing one sport does not seem to characterise long-term participation. Previous studies suggest that children's sports (aged 6-12) should focus more on deliberate play and emphasise development, fun and enjoyment. Competitions can be accentuated to a greater extent after the age of 12 (Côté & Hay, 2002; Riksidrottsförbundet, 2009). Around 10 percent of those still participating at 19 had specialised early on in one sport and continued with

only that sport. Over 50 percent of those still participating started early with the sport they were still doing at 19, although they had tried other sports as well along the way. Those still participating at 19 also had experience of taking part in a greater number of different sports than those who had stopped. This is in line with Côté & Abernethy (2012), who recommend that sports programmes should develop long-term participants and talents should be based on diversification rather than specialisation and play rather than practice, especially in the early years (6-15 years).

Another prerequisite for still participating at 19 years of age seems to be a continued participation. Nobody in the studied group had stopped for a long period and then started again. Those participating at 19 were (mostly) involved in football or equestrian sport, both of which it is possible to pursue regardless of competitive ambitions. However, few sports seem to be accessible at an older age which implies that they are dominated by the logic of competition and ranking and therefore are not open to those less skilled or to youth who do not have elite ambitions.

In some competitive sports, it is possible to take part at different levels and with different ambitions. Such sports, like football, are accessible to all ages. Some high-level football clubs offer regular training sessions, while lower-level teams play less regularly and do not require the same training or levels of ambitions (Thedin Jakobsson, 2014, Norberg, 2015, 2016). Other sports, like tennis and swimming, seem to be difficult to pursue in teenage years on a recreational basis. The 19-year-olds in this study did not participate at all in these sports (see also Norberg, 2015, 2016). Again, the interpretation is that these sports emphasise competition fostering, which in turn leads to selection and ranking. Young people who are not selected early on, or have no elite ambitions requiring intensive training and taking part in competitions, cannot continue

with these sports (Peterson, 2008). Staying on and practising once or twice a week do not seem to be possible, or attractive, options (Thedin Jakobsson, 2014; Norberg, 2015). On the other hand, the underpinning logics of sports like martial arts, boxing and golf do not seem as selective and thus are open to older participants who take part on a recreational level. In some sports it is possible to be involved in training without having to compete, whereas in other sports there is a need for specialisation. This will naturally have consequences for how accessible a sport is. Youth sport seems to be more available if both competitive and democratic forms of fostering dominate practice. Therefore, like others (see also Côté & Hay, 2002; Peterson, 2008), we suggest a heavier focus should be directed towards democratic fostering and deliberate play.

Limitations and Strengths of the Study

Even though the results are based on a nationwide sample of respondents, the number of participants (n=241) is relatively small we believe that the study's strengths are its longitudinal design. The respondent rate is 41 percent of the baseline population, and all the respondents have done the survey on all four occasions, and the study stretches over nine important years from childhood to young adulthood. The study group has also answered retrospectively at the age of 19. In longitudinal studies there is always a risk that those who are interested in the topic are more motivated to answer (Crocker, Kowalski, & Graham, 1998; Morrow, Jackson, Disch, & Mood, 2000). One limitation with self-reported questioners is that there can be difficulties to understand and answer the questions (Gratton & Jones 2010). Another limitation in this study is that we have not used the respondent's own measurement of training volume (which is difficult to estimate and compare over the years especially according to age). We are however, first and foremost interested in the length of the participation instead of training volume and we therefore use participation at least once a week in each sport and participation in competitions as measurements. Despite

these limitations, we suggest that the study's findings provide valuable insights into the patterns of club sport participation (see also Fraser-Thomas, Falcão & Wolman, 2016).

Conclusion and Implications

Although the RF (Riksidrottsförbundet, 2016) and scholars (eg., Pilgaard, 2013; Peterson, 2008) have emphasised that participation in youth sports should provide opportunities to take part at different levels based on the logics of democratic fostering and not only competition fostering, this does not seem to be pervading youth sport. This is not in line with the objectives of the state and the sports' movement that advocates that all who wish to should be able to take part in different sports regardless of skills, ambitions, or age.

The context of youth sports is crucial for the issue of participation. If so many young people get involved in youth sport, but soon learn that it is not for them, this should be a wake-up call for the sports movement and the state. If local sports clubs are to provide sporting activities for young people with different levels of ambition and taste, RF and the state will need to make this possible. Perhaps youth sports should also be organised as 'drop-in spots' with recreational overtones, stressing values like learning and having fun together as the focal points. There should also be opportunities to play many different sports. Moreover, youth sport needs to be organised so that beginners and experienced teenagers can easily engage in sport at different levels. RF has decided on a new agenda for 2025 and the mission is to make the participation rate look more like a rectangle than a triangle. This is a good ambition, but there is work to be done in order to make youth sport more accessible longer.

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