Affect in New Zealand junior sport: The forgotten dynamic

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While junior sport offers a plethora of motives and emotions for young people, their motives for participation are often diminished by adult-imposed versions of it. One of the outcomes of this can be young athletes’ decision to disengage from sport. In this paper I will argue for the need to address the affective influences that should steer appropriate pedagogy and thereby maximise learning opportunities for participants. To date attention has been directed toward scientific and cognitivist approaches of instruction in sport settings. Many such approaches ignore the emotional tenets of playful activity whereby sport is presented in either an emotional vacuum or as something that is a serious matter. The teaching and coaching of sport as a form of work invites scrutiny and this paper will explore and describe how youth sport can be returned to its ludic roots.

INTRODUCTION

THE years spanning childhood and youth are a time when young people formulate many thoughts and behaviours that can have an enduring impact on the ensuing years of their lives.

It is a period of potential excitement, freedom, uncertainty, risk, identity, exploration, and stimulation. Children and young people explore options, make decisions and establish behaviours that are often indicative of the unfolding years. Many of their experiences will
help shape the decisions they will make about who they are and what they want from life. The opportunity also must exist for individuals to learn about themselves and this requires the freedom to explore and experiment. A pertinent question then is, “Can sport and physical activity help alleviate the confusion that often determines the individual’s place in the social world?”

For young people this stage of their lives is often accompanied by the repositioning of movement forms as sport appears as part of the new cadre of activity options. Changes often will require attention to how transitions from contexts dominated by play to new sport versions are made. Any shift in play form need only address some basic tenets. For example the social context often will determine what participants will value. In many contexts young people are fed on a diet of skill repetitions based on the assumption that skills must be mastered before games can be played. However, most kids want to play games, not practise isolated skills and if they are in a learning environment the outcome of the games is relative to the opposition. The important consideration should be not to hold young people back from playing a game because of their skill level. It is possible for young athletes to have a good game with technique that is merely improving. Playing games is crucial to the pursuit of fun and enjoyment that are in turn crucial to obtaining a participant’s commitment to physical activity or sport. Such a pursuit is buoyed by a collection of subjective states collectively referred to as affect.

In this paper I will argue that for many young people sport experiences are often diminished of affect, the very opiate they seek and enjoy. There is a need to incorporate affective factors in any sport experience, not as a supplement but as an integral component of their movement encounters. Following an examination of the manifestations of affect and a snapshot of more recent sport delivery initiatives this paper will outline one New Zealand programme at whose core is the affective dimension of sport.

**THE IMPORTANCE OF AFFECT**

The notion of affect can encompass a broad range of dimensions including emotion, feeling, preference and choice. Affect is also based on a concoction of beliefs, aspirations, attitudes and appreciations that can occur at an individual or collective level (Beane, 1990; , 1995, p. 314). It is that cocktail which often evolves into or combines with behaviour and cognition. What has often been problematic for the area of affect is a perceived vagueness or ambiguity by many who chose to study or address it. This area of learning is often hidden, not easily expressed or conveyed, is subjective, imprecise, often develops slowly, it’s personal and perhaps most important from the researcher’s perspective, it is difficult to observe and/or measure. Moreover, affect frequently resists definition and is often in a state of shift. And while many would see advantage to establishing definitions for terms such as fun, joy or delight, so too are there advantages in resisting acute definitions of such terms. Establishing a strict definition can create unnecessary limitations on what such terms may mean and therefore restrict any exploration of meaning. Rather I would prefer to explore some of these terms to shed light on what and how affect could enhance sport experiences for young people.

The most pervasive and often convenient term associated with affect in sport is fun. The catchcry of “that was fun” is a common expression accorded to sport by participants. It
has been given as the main motive for participation offered by young people (Gill, Gross, & Huddleston, 1985; L. M. Wankel & Kreisel, 1985; L. M. Wankel & Sefton, 1989) and is often
tagged to a strong social connection. But the most common association with fun is enjoyment,
a positive affective outcome that could include things like diversion, amusement or pleasure.
While it is beyond the scope of this paper to indulge in an in-depth exploration of fun, it
is nonetheless helpful to lay a backcloth for why affect may warrant a status of ‘important’
in the search for meaning.

Joy is a similar concept associated with positive affective experience. It is often viewed
as the antonym of sadness and therefore holds a positive emotional standing. Heywood
(2001) argues for the need to include joy as an essential component of the learning process,
in particular the need to seek this state that is sustaining and it “comes close to the Zen
notion of bliss” (p. 74). As Light (2003) has indicated, joy can often derive from a young
person’s sense that they have gained immense satisfaction from something as basic as
contributing to a team or having a role in decision-making. Few coaches and or teachers
would deny the need for positive emotional environments and clearly joy is a strong potential
contributor for such desired outcomes in junior sport settings.

A more recently explored illustration of affect is delight. Kretchmar (2005) contends
that activities including fun or enjoyment are often quickly forgotten by participants. By
contrast, “delight tends to be a high-demand subjective state” (p. 203) but is often more
elusive and veiled. The pursuit of delight may require close connection with something
that is highly desirable but often improbable. Despite its aloofness delight remains desirable
as a constituent of the sport experience, something that sport settings should at least offer
potential as sites for the search for this affective offshoot. Kretchmar (2005) questions whether
existing activity resources have effectively tapped into rich affective qualities such as delight.

**APPROPRIATE PROGRAMMES**

The provision of programmes (particularly sport) that encourage and foster enhanced
participation patterns among young people is needed. To achieve participant adherence to
physical activity programmes providers must recognise the factors that drive sustained
attention namely support, enjoyment, confidence in one’s ability and the removal of barriers
to participation. Support is crucial to the transition that many young people make from
play to more sophisticated sport forms. The engagement in play by children and adults
assumes differing forms and meaning for both age groups. Just as one cannot expect a
young child to understand complex and inappropriate physics formulae neither can we
expect a child to understand nor master adult play forms. The transition from children’s
play to adult sport forms requires time and appropriate supervision. It is therefore important
for educators and coaches to facilitate the transition process during the earlier years.

Any shift in play form need only address some basic tenets. For example: attention to
the content of a play or sport experience is not as important as how the experience is
situated. The social context often will determine what participants will value. In many
contexts young people are fed on a diet of skill repetitions based on the assumption that
skills must be mastered before games can be played. However, most kids want to play
games, not practise the skills and if they are in a learning environment the outcome of the
games is relative to the opposition. The important consideration should be not to hold young people back from playing a game because of their skill level. It is possible for young athletes to have a good game with technique that is merely improving. Playing games is crucial to the pursuit of fun and enjoyment which are, in turn, crucial to obtaining a participant's commitment to physical activity or sport.

Social context is also central to the development of close social relationships and that is why sport is a good environment for the development of cooperative skills and prosocial behaviour in young people. However, the play or sport context itself does not necessarily promote such desired behaviour. This will occur only if children and young people are given a chance to experience successful interaction and true collaboration.

**THE YOUTH SPORT FIELD**

In their appraisal of worldwide trends in youth sport De Knop, Engstrom and Skirstad (1996) warn that more recently youth sport has become more specialised, institutionalised and differentiated. The prevalence of highly organised adult-dominated contexts has shifted many sport forms from something that is quite playful to something that has become more serious. There is a concluding plea that “play and learning must come first [and] the intrinsic value of sports must have priority” (p. 280). These international issues raised by De Knop et al. pertain to The Antipodes as well. While progressive and appropriate programmes have been implemented in Australia and New Zealand, there are still concerns about the type of sport experiences young people are receiving. Thomson (2000) reports that such trends are promoting significant attitude changes toward sport by young adolescents who are opting for less organised and regulated sport forms collectively referred to as informal sport. Such a shift may well be a signal that existing programmes and structures require review and adjustment.

What is needed in youth sport is a predominance of models and pedagogies that allow players to exercise autonomous decision-making and creativity. Two models that have featured on the sport development landscape in New Zealand and Australia are The Sport Education Model (D Siedentop, 1987; D. Siedentop, Hastie, & Van der Mars, 2004; D. Siedentop, Mand, C & Taggart, A, 1986) and Teaching Games for Understanding [also known as Game Sense & The Tactical Approach)] (L. Griffin, L. & Butler, 2005; L. Griffin, Mitchell, & Osln, 1997; Light, 2005; Thorpe, Bunker, & Almond, 1986). The genesis of sport education lies in the early work of Siedentop (1972) and his interest in play and play theory. The theory was influenced by the work of Huizinga (1962) and Caillois (1961) who signalled the importance of play as a learning experience and as a desirable pursuit for both children and adults. Siedentop (1972) advocated play as “an essential source of human behaviour” (p. 178). The engagement in play by children and adults assumes differing forms and meaning for both age groups.

The sport education model offered greater improvement in student play, better application of strategic play and greater participation by students. In summary, the Australian and American findings supported the New Zealand perspective that “education about sport helps students to understand and value what is required to make sport personally rewarding” (Grant, 1992, p. 314). Perhaps more importantly the Sport Education Model advocates the
importance of games as a vehicle to learning about the full meaning of sport. The opportunity to compete in small sided and low-pressure games provides players with avenues to pursue affective by-products such as fun, enjoyment and delight. The closer positioning of play and sport in the Sport Education Model averts the intense characteristics that often see the latter diminish the former along with the associated affective benefits.

From their recent review of 62 published articles on sport education Wallhead and O'Sullivan (2005) argue “SE has the potential to promote more positive cultural dimensions of sport and physical activity and offer a challenge to the exclusionary discourses of much of institutionalised sport” (p. 181). However, while values such as affinity, equity and culture feature as aspects and outcomes of the sport education model, there appears to have been no specific attention paid by researchers to the notion of affect amidst the vast array of quite recent initiatives. In my mind such an absence is lamentable.

The status for TGfU (Teaching Games for Understanding) is not much better. While affect has been advocated as an area for attention, to date it has also escaped the tentacles of most researchers. I recently suggested “the challenge will be to develop a new, dynamic and complete conceptualisation of the TGfU model marked by a congruence of cognition, action and affect. To do that may require exploring how as educators we can help TGfU become more animated through informed excitement and or guided emotion.” (Pope, 2005, p. 284).

So why should we pay attention to affect? Kretchmar (2005) argues that sport contexts should be marked by delight, places where journeys created by learners seek out “new feelings, sensations, emotions, insights and skills” (p. 206). One way to illustrate such journeys is the contrasting spaces proposed by Delcuze and Gauzurri (1988) where striated space is contrasted by smooth space. Striated space speaks of control, order and imposition. All the pathways for the participants appear restricted or hobbled by the space itself. By contrast smooth space allows for chaos, the freedom to roam, to create, to perform. This space is characterised by chance and unpredictability, as opposed to striated space that is arranged, rigid and convenient. And perhaps of most pertinent smooth space offers greater scope for affect, the emotions, sounds and continuity of movement. At a simplistic level we could say that striated spaces is what we often find in institutionalised or adult-imposed sport, while smooth space is where young people will often want to be – spaces marked by sensation and creativity where they call the shots and pursue delight.

Kretchmar (2005) advocates for the need to further explore what a pedagogy for delight might entail. Granted, youth sport contexts do exist where the derivations of affect are present, they are often unplanned, rarely inherent, seldom central to player learning and participation, frequently serendipitous and usually fleeting. I would however, like to share one example of what I believe to be a programme built on an affective pedagogy: Samba Soccer.

**SAMBA SOCCER: FOOTBALL AND FUN**

In a high school gymnasium in Hamilton, New Zealand, Michael Groom offers a programme he has pioneered and now taught throughout the North Island. The following description is based on observations I conducted of the Samba Soccer programme, combined with
interview material conducted by Margaret Forde of The New Zealand Listener. Groom is a former All White [national team member], who having played Brazil in the 1982 World Cup, was enamoured with their approach to the game. According to Michael Groom, Brazilians are not fixated with results, but they get them anyway. Their play is expressive, rather than combative. Groom’s memories of playing Brazil in the 1982 World Cup finals are revealing: “Then we came up against Brazil and it was like we were on another planet. It was inspiring. Playing against Brazil changed my whole football philosophy. We saw them do some incredible things we would only try on the practice pitch. If what they tried didn’t come off, they didn’t seem concerned. And they never appeared to bag each other for trying something spectacular” (Forde, 2003). Groom exclaims: “If you watch even the top players, you’ll see they never lose the capacity to associate their sport with fun. Even their national coach talks about playing happy football and I believe there’s a message in that attitude for us all, whatever we’re doing” (Forde, 2003).

Futebol de salao literally means ‘football on a court’. Groom encourages his Samba Soccer students to make friends with the thing they’re kicking. “As with anything, there’s no shortcut. The only way to improve is to be with the ball” (Forde, 2003). All children in Brazil play futebol de salao before playing conventional football. The programme uses smaller, heavier soccer balls, often with a luminous silver skin around which player’s dance, sway, skip, leap and swing. Samba Soccer sessions are marked by emotion, expression and a healthy zeal to try new tricks and moves. Boys and girls of mixed ages play beside one another within the Alegria [meaning happiness] school. To the visitor observing this setting it soon becomes obvious that this is a very non-traditional approach to coaching a sport. Inhibitions appear to be left at the door and players are encouraged to dance and perform under the watchful eye of Groom. The more children can perform with the ball the more they are encouraged to take it to the next level. There is a notable absence of correction or intervention from the adult presence.

This form of coaching soccer for young people is being transformed from the structured game traditionally associated with European immigrants to an art form, an expression, an embodiment of freedom and fun – played to the beat of booming Brazilian samba sounds. The samba is seen as a cultural symbol of emotional expression that is an important part of the Brazilian way of life. The samba and its soccer equivalent are seen as a demonstration of the Brazilian penchant for doing things beyond the proper procedures (Gannon, 2004). Like the samba dance, Brazilian football is marked by seemingly constant movement, particularly small steps and circular actions executed in time to the samba beat. Playing for enjoyment is a direct outcome of young players being exposed to Groom’s coaching. Forde reports a principal who acquired Groom’s services stated: “The music makes all the difference. We have all found even if you make a mistake, the music keeps going, so you do, too” (Forde, 2003).

The popularity of this form of soccer is growing by the season. Although he is aware of negativity from “some parts of the soccer establishment”, he is undaunted. “What I think they fail to see is our objectives extend beyond soccer. If a kid can leap and experience the joy and freedom of movement and expression with a football, it’s not just a soccer thing. What I understand with children is, if you can expose them to a world of possibilities, you can’t do anything more vital for them” (Forde, 2003). There is a constant and devout quest
for the silky touch, a setting where it is not as important how many goals you can score but how you score the goals. Samba Soccer is a sporting example of thinking outside the square. While challenging conventionality it has successfully managed to marry the leading sport in the world with a stream of emotion and delight evidenced through play where what you do is more important than whether you win.

Perhaps the biggest struggle a programme like Samba Soccer may face is the perception that is often associated with play, particularly by many adults. Play often receives a low-status because it is associated with childhood and not adult life. Children and young people are expected to move on, to move up to sport as the next tier. Playing is deemed irresponsible, foolhardy and lacking maturity, the antithesis of work where you are rewarded by dedication, industry and rational thought. Yet in these times of desired youthfulness it is perhaps appropriate to ask whether a work-play binary is at all necessary whereby providers and participants rather look towards the middle ground and the potential of playful pursuit in more sport programmes.

CONCLUSION

The meaning that sport holds for young people changes as they move from one social context to another and from one level of sport to another. As their sporting world unfolds they establish attitudes and ideas about the values and purposes of participation. Unfortunately much of the learning that young people experience in sporting contexts has been somewhat restricted. Skills and/or strategies are often offered only at an introductory level in environments that promised little hope of success. An initial playfulness of early games and sport often becomes transformed into a more work-like approach at the competitive sport level. The scientific aspects closely linked with coaching elite sport have become quite manifest in many participatory sport environments eventually filtering down to where the majority of sport is housed, that is youth sport. The practice of sport and the possibilities it offers for delight and playfulness in this part of the world has, in my mind, become marginalised by a top down version of a technocratic model evident in various levels of concentration and or sophistication determined by those who hold power in such youth sport environments. The biggest risk associated with such a stratiﬁed environment in the lack of attention accorded to affect.

It is this type of shift that can see intended beneﬁts and authentic meanings subsumed by some of the negative characteristics of contemporary adult sport forms. The isolated and often simplistic play spaces of young people are now more than ever, at risk of adult-imposed developments including overemphasis on winning, tacit endorsement of aggression, rule manipulation for personal gain, a propensity for outcome and record, and discrimination based on gender, ethnicity or ability. As a result, the potential of sport as a learning forum for young people is signiﬁcantly reduced. The outcome for many participants is disengagement. Sport can be harmful and we need to guard children’s and youth sport from the excesses so often seen in adult versions, but for many young people sport has the potential to produce desirable outcomes as is evident in Light’s examination of the nippers in this volume. The challenge is thus, through what means and in which contexts could or should they occur and who gets to achieve such outcomes? The provision of programmes
(particularly sport) that encourage and foster enhanced participation patterns among young people are needed. To achieve participant adherence to physical activity programmes providers must recognise the factors that drive sustained attention namely support, enjoyment, confidence in one’s ability and the removal of barriers to participation. Purveyors of physical activity forms [in this case sport] must ensure that youth have opportunities to seek out and explore performative options — not as the only option nor at all times but hopefully as distinct possibilities.

REFERENCES


