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SPORT AS A DISCIPLINE-BUILDING SYSTEM: HOW STRUCTURED ATHLETIC ENVIRONMENTS SHAPE ADULT IDENTITY, BEHAVIOR, AND LIFE OUTCOMES

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Abstract:
Society measures children's participation in sport based primarily on athletic outcomes: wins and losses, standings, championships, or playing professionally. Because only a select few will make it to the elite level or become professional athletes, we must question what else sport has to offer our youth. This research seeks to understand organized sport as an institution of discipline that engrains lifelong habits, independent of athletic outcomes. Sport in general, like many institutions in society, places youth under a schedule of training, authority, accountability, and failure. These repetitive systems allow children to learn discipline and skills that will reach far beyond their years playing a sport. For the purpose of this study, discipline is not treated as a personality trait that one is born with, but a learned behavior that is reinforced through routine, consequence, and corporeal knowledge. Based on current literature found within sports science, developmental psychology, and education, this paper will analyze how sport engrains discipline and life skills into our youth that will follow them into adulthood. Once these traits have been better understood, we can place more value on how society, schools, and policymakers view organized sport.

Keywords: youth sport development; discipline formation; habit internalization; athlete identity; life skills transfer; structured environments; behavioral development

1. Introduction

Sport occupies an important place in most cultures today. We encourage our kids to play sports to keep them physically active and socially involved, but also to give them opportunities to become 'the next best thing'. Billions of dollars and euros are spent each

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year on keeping the conveyor belt of sport moving from recreational levels right through to elite play and developmental and junior coaching ranks. In football and other team sports worldwide, the numbers are stark. There are fewer than 5%, and probably closer to 1% of players who make it to play professionally. We in the industry ask ourselves again and again how to improve performance, how to get better return on our talent identification investments, where we go wrong and what we can do better. We never seem to ask 'why?' Why does youth sport matter if only 1% play professionally?

Research, policies, strategies and conversations surrounding sport often focus on the end goal of sporting excellence. The reality of elite sporting success is seen as a failure of development if you don't make it. Human and behavioral outcomes are mentioned, but never seem to be the why or primary focus of playing sport. This has created a gap in our understanding of how sport can and does develop discipline, identity and lifelong behaviors.

The development of discipline through sport is often mentioned, but what does it really mean to be disciplined? Also, how does it transfer from the sporting arena to life outside of sport? Discipline is typically thought of as a trait or attribute that some people have, and some don't. We don't talk about how discipline is taught, encouraged and learned through sport, which makes it difficult to study how it transfers into life outside of sport. Additionally, what is it about sport that allows it to create a space for these life lessons to be ingrained into our behaviors?

Sport is different from other contexts, like school or home, where kids learn behaviors. Sport provides regular periods of structured activity where adults are in charge, there are rules to follow, consequences if those rules are not followed, and individuals who have authority over you. When you have training twice a day, games on the weekend, and maybe Sunday team meetings, you are repeatedly put in situations where you need to show up on time, try your best and behave in a certain way. Discipline isn't optional when playing sports; you learn to act a certain way, or you will be kicked out.

Failure is another thing kids learn to deal with through sport. We lose games. We make mistakes. We get kicked off the team. We get injured. Failure is normalized through sport. It is common. We see it all the time. It is public. Anyone watching can see you fail. Failure is something that everyone deals with as athletes. But failure is also something you learn to get over quickly. You learn how to control your emotions and pick yourself back up. As adults, these are skills we rely on to adapt throughout our lives.

Sport also allows teenagers to try on identities. Adolescence is a time when we care tremendously about what other people think of us and how we fit in with the world around us. When you play a sport, you have a team to belong to. You have a position on that team that tells you what you should be doing and how to behave around others. As you get older, you begin to realize how your behavior impacts your team, and you start to take pride in doing your role correctly. You develop an identity as an athlete which is based on doing rather than just thinking.

So, what does this have to do with discipline? By participating in sports for a prolonged period, you may learn to be disciplined. Not every sporting environment will teach athletes this, but the capacity is there. You may learn how to show up to places on time because you have to. You may learn how to deal with stress and push through it to improve because that's what coaches tell you to do. You may learn how to sleep less and spend more time doing something you love with people you love. These are all behaviors that we benefit from throughout our lives, even if we aren't playing sports.

However, there is still a dearth of research piecing together empirical evidence and theoretical understandings of sport longitudinally as a system that builds discipline. Literature tends to focus on individual life skills or psychosocial assets in sport without meaningful connections to other factors or a comprehensive view of development. There needs to be more attention placed on viewing discipline as part of a larger system that includes habit development, transfer of learning, and identity development, with consideration for inconsistencies.

The objective of this paper is to help reframe youth sport as a system of discipline development. The paper will explore how participating in sport for reasons other than becoming a professional athlete can help children and teenagers develop discipline that extends beyond their involvement in sport. The following questions will be sought after:

1) In what ways can sport be seen as a discipline development system?
2) How does sport allow children to learn and develop discipline?
3) How does sport learned discipline continue to affect them after they are no longer participating?

This paper seeks to provide an interdisciplinary review of literature as well as a cohesive framework for thinking about how youth sport can help develop discipline. By helping to give sport involvement more holistic value, this paper can help inform future conversations regarding sport in the fields of sports science, education, and youth policy.

2. Discipline as a Learned System, not a Personality Trait

Definitions of discipline from common usage and social science typically characterize it as a trait or attribute of a person, suggesting stability in situations and over time. Definitions that position disciplined people as having self-control, motivation, or will power and undisciplined people as lacking these qualities tell us little about how discipline develops, changes or persists over time. Modern research increasingly views discipline less as an individual trait and more as a learned system of responses developed through experiencing consistent demands, feedback, and consequences.

Conceptualizing discipline developmentally, we might say it is the learned ability to behave in ways that lead to long-term benefits when faced with short term discomfort, boredom, tiredness, or alternative rewards. Behaving in disciplined ways does not simply happen. It develops through experiences in settings where there are demands to behave in disciplined ways. Structured sport is one of the few contexts where children and adolescents learn to show up on time, work hard for extended periods of time, follow

rules, and control their emotions day in and day out. Critically, they learn this within a consequence system that matters to them (i.e. less playing time, sitting on the bench, getting cut).

Other environments where children learn discipline include schools and home life, but these settings lack the consistency of expectations that sport provides. Will there be consequences for being undisciplined in sports? Yes. Will your coach care if you don't turn in an assignment on time? Maybe. Will you have to run sprints if you lose your cool? Not if your teacher doesn't see it. Training is at the same time every day. They keep attendance. They can see your effort. And they do it in front of your teammates. Discipline can be learned behaviorally, not just through explanation. If you show up day after day and behave in disciplined ways, acting in a disciplined way will become habitual. And if you skip this practice because you don't feel like it, or show up late to that meeting, you may still be allowed to participate, but you'll have to earn it.

Another way that discipline through sport is different from many other contexts children learn discipline is parent and coach behavior. Sports are not without power dynamics or rules meant to be feared. But if you want to keep playing, you will need to figure out what is expected and meet those expectations most of the time. If you miss one practice because you don't feel like it, you are still likely to show up the next day. But miss too many because you don't feel like it. Or constantly show up late. Or feel like you don't need to try as hard during drills. Coaches will notice these behaviors. They will compare you to your teammates. You will not start. You may not make the team. Discipline through sport is less about knowing right from wrong and more about behaving in ways that allow you to continue to do what you love. There is a functional purpose to behave disciplined in sport that does not always exist in school or at home. This is why sport can be such an effective system for learning behavior.

Thinking of discipline as a learned system helps explain why not every athlete develops discipline from sport. Bad coaches. Some kids don't play for very long. Some teams don't hold players accountable. But for athletes who play over several years, especially during their developmental years, sport provides a reliable system for learning discipline.

3. Training Routines and Habit Internalization

How might disciplined behaviors become engrained? Habits. Habits are learned behaviors that occur subconsciously due to frequent repetition in similar situations. Training is habitual because it happens regularly, usually has a physical component, and matters to you emotionally.

Training requires you to schedule your life around it. When you play sports, other things in your life must adapt to your league's schedule. You have to get your sleep and eat at certain times. You may have to plan around school and family time. You learn to manage your time to accommodate your sport. Additionally, this behavior is required if

you want to continue participating. If you do not learn how to manage your time internally, there will be external consequences.

Your discipline becomes automatic because you feel the effects of showing up (or not) to training, practice, and games in your body. If you don't sleep, eat, or train properly, you will feel it. Maybe you feel tired, or your coaches get upset with you for poor performance. Maybe you get injured because you weren't going to practice the week before. Learning with consequences and rewards built into the activity helps your brain cling to that knowledge. Discipline becomes less of a concept because you understand cause and effect without someone explaining it to you.

Automaticity also plays a role. When you first start playing sports, you may need your coach or parent hovering over you to make sure you're doing things at the right time. However, as you repeat these tasks over your athletic career, it becomes a habit. You just know when to show up to train, practice, and games. You prepare yourself mentally. You eat. You sleep. You don't need someone to remind you because it becomes who you are.

As humans, when we practice a behavior over and over in the same place with the same cues, it becomes a habit. Our habits are stronger the longer we repeat them. While the length of participation can be different for everyone, the longer you play sports, the more your training habits will engrain themselves.

I know adults who still act like athletes. They are up before the sun, structured every day, and live their lives by goals. Sure, they could be like this because their job requires it. But how many jobs require you to go to practice and push your body every day? I know several former athletes who live this way because they trained as if it were their job.

Your body also learns to deal with delayed consequences. You will never know if you practiced enough yesterday until your game tomorrow. And even then, you may not see the fruits of your labor for weeks, months, or years of repetitive training. You learn to deal with boredom, physical discomfort, and uncertainty about your performance. Delayed gratification is something we aren't taught much anymore. Think about it; how many things in life give you instant feedback? Practicing sports forces you to learn how to be uncomfortable.

I'm not saying these athletic habits will ONLY lead to positive behaviors. If you're coached by multiple people who don't speak to each other, travel for demanding workouts four times a week, and feel anxious about making your teammates happy, you may develop some habits that don't prioritize your well-being. But when they're good, these types of automatic behaviors are few and far between.

4. Authority, Rules, and Accountability in Sport Environments

Sport is distinct from recreational exercise or free play because it takes place under defined authorities and with explicit rules that hold athletes accountable. Whether the athlete is looking up to his coach or coach superior, listening to his peers or parent

captains, following the official's directions or adhering to the league's bylaws, participants in youth sport are given regular exposure to authority. Players learn what it means to follow a chain of command and do their job when they show up to practice or games.

Similar to how parents model authority figures for their children outside of sports, coaches and officials provide examples of authority within sports. However, coaches are different from parents in the way they can wield authority over athletes. Because a coach can choose not to play someone, cut them from a team, or ask them to run more sprints, their power is conditional. Kids learn how to behave and respond to authority that they know has power over them, but are not tied to them emotionally.

Rules are defined, consistently enforced, and public. When athletes know they are expected to be at practice on time, follow the playbook during a game, and cannot curse at an official, their responsibilities are clearly identified. And if they miss practice, forget their playbook, or lose their temper, they will likely know immediately. They will know they'll be benched for the rest of the game or run sprints during practice. There will be no excuse from the coach that doesn't apply to everyone else. Consequences will be administered to uphold the system, not to condemn the athlete. This allows athletes to be accountable for their actions instead of being scared to fail.

One of the reasons athletes know instantly if they've broken a rule is that everyone is watching. Their coach will see if they give 100% effort, and their teammates will notice when they're late. There are very few instances in sport where an athlete can hide their mistakes or lack of effort. Unlike school, where a student could turn in a bad test and not know why they failed for weeks, athletes typically know right away if they're slacking. Because most of these consequences are immediate, athletes learn from their behaviour more quickly.

But athletes aren't just accountable to their coach or teammates, they're accountable to their entire team. If they miss practice, their team will have to play shorthanded. If they don't give 100% effort, their team could lose. If they lose their temper, they could derail a team's momentum. Athletes learn that their actions not only affect them but also those around them as well. Learning to be accountable to your team helps athletes become better people.

There are a few places, outside of sport, where kids will experience constant accountability. Whether it's school or home, kids will rarely be held to the same standard as they are with their coach. A teacher cares if Johnny comes to class prepared, but unless he fails the next test, they won't know if he studied or not. And at home, kids can get away with anything when one of their parents is upset. Sports hold athletes accountable for their actions on a daily basis, which is why they learn how to be disciplined.

As mentioned above, authority and accountability only work if athletes feel they are coming from a place of fairness. If athletes feel as though they coach and referees don't know what they're doing, they will not respect them, and learning to be disciplined will not take place. But when leagues and coaches operate under the same rules and

administer consequences on a regular basis, athletes will respect their superiors and do what it takes not to let them down.

Athletes are more likely to be disciplined later on in life because of their experiences with authority and accountability when they were younger. They learn not take it personally when being evaluated or think ahead about what is expected of them in their position. I believe these are reasons we see so many former athletes become amazing employees. They understand what it takes to be a part of an organization and how their actions reflect on their team. However, this isn't to say that athletes are the only ones who grow up to be great at functioning under authority. Sport just gives athletes many opportunities to be exposed to authority.

5. Failure, Feedback, and Emotional Regulation

Sport is unique compared to most youth environments because failure just happens all the time. Outside of sport, we attempt to protect kids from failure as much as possible. Schoolwork may come with delayed rather than immediate feedback. Parents may filter who kids lose to at home games. Coaches may refuse to evaluate players until late in the season. We teach that failure will happen, but avoid exposing kids to it as much as possible. But in sport, we fail constantly. We lose. We make mistakes. We get cut. We get fewer reps. We embarrass ourselves in front of others. Important aspects of sport revolve around repeated exposure to stressful situations and learning to deal with them.

No matter how successful you are as an athlete, you will fail way more times than you don't. Sure, you may win the battle, but the war? You will lose that much more than you win. You will lose to injuries. You will lose to other people's good games. You will lose before you're even done playing a drill. And as kids, we start losing at a young age, and we start losing in front of others. It forces us to feel bad about ourselves while also needing to go out there and keep playing and practicing. Learn how to deal with that, and you'll learn to deal with a lot.

Not only do we fail frequently, but we also get feedback on our performance consistently throughout the sport. Feedback is immediate, concrete, and behavior focused. We make a mistake, and we know it. The outcome of our play is clear. And there are real consequences to our actions that we can see. This allows for little grey area when it comes to evaluating our performances. We are able to attribute our successes and failures to things we can control. Did you not score because you didn't try your best? Didn't prepare well enough? Made a bad decision? And at the same time, we learn that this loss or mistake doesn't define who we are as people.

Sport forces us to learn how to perform under stress. Whether it be the pressure to win, being tired, or being evaluated, sport forces us to stand there and feel like crap if we want to perform our best. And we do it over and over and over again. We learn how to perform with uncomfortable feelings and then learn how to reset after something bad happens. How to shake off that mistake and move on to the next play. We are forced to

sit in uncomfortable emotions and learn how to self-regulate. Something that can be very difficult to learn outside of sport.

Think about how difficult it would be to learn these things if we didn't have something like sport. Take school, for example. How often are your kids FAILURE proofed? They give them something difficult to work on, and as soon as they aren't excelling at it, they take it away and work on something else. Or what about at home? We let our kids go wherever they want on their bracket and have little tournaments to make sure everyone wins? How often do they get criticized on their skills or sports knowledge by their parents?

Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that these things are bad. They're done with good intentions, and they do serve a purpose. Protecting your kids from failure every chance you get outside of sport will only allow you to control how they feel outside of sport less and less. Sport allows us to learn how to fail often because of one simple thing… EFFORT.

You can't really fail at a sport if you tried your best. As kids, coaches can teach them that if they mess up its ok and they can learn from their mistakes because they were giving 100%. You control whether or not you win or lose in sport by how much effort you put in. Coaches can create an environment where failure is something that happens often and is expected.

But what happens when the coach yells at you every time you turn the ball over? What happens when your coach makes you feel stupid after you make a mistake? What happens if the environment you are in doesn't let you feel uncomfortable? THEN sport will not teach you how to control your emotions. You will start to feel anxious when you know you'll be tasked to perform. You might even stop playing because you learn that failing is something to be scared of.

This is why it's so important that youth sport teaches kids how to play through mistakes and embrace failure. We as coaches need to create an environment for our athletes to feel uncomfortable and allow them to feel those emotions. Once they understand that they can feel those feelings and perform their best, we begin to teach them that they are in control of how they feel about failure.

6. Identity Formation Through Athletic Participation

Adolescence is a time in life when we form our identities. An identity is something we tell ourselves about who we are based on our roles, how we should behave, and how good we are at certain things. Sport is unique in that it allows adolescents to create an identity. Learning identities through sport is unique because you have to act a certain way to fit that identity. Also, others are judging you for performing these tasks while constantly comparing you to other teammates.

The substance of sport allows for identities to be formed through action instead of just telling yourself who you are. I feel like sport helps create better identities because

they are built on something you have to show, how you behave. Also, in sports, you have a lot of responsibility, which can help with discipline being attached to your identity.

Some examples of identities in sport are your role on a team. Are you a starter? Off the bench? Team captain? 3rd string? The thing about these identities is that you can always change them by trying harder, being more responsible, or improving your skills. You are not stuck at a identity basing on how you see yourself. Other athletes know how to play their position, and if they can't, they will not play as much or might not make the team. So instead of judging who you are as a person, they judge your behavior and place you where they feel you should be.

Since you are on a team, you learn that your identity is linked to other people. If you don't laugh along with your team's joke, you might not be seen as part of the team. Another thing is that your team will only be as good as how you can bring yourself to be. Because of this, you learn that in order for you to have that team identity, you must be better. These values will become part of your identity as an athlete.

Identity is built through experience, not words. When you show up to practice every day and hear the same things, you will start to believe them. You will start to take those things personally, and they will become part of who you are. Coaches repeat things to you so you remember them and start to use them.

The more you have to show someone you are better, the more those things become your identity. The reason kids become disciplined athletes is that they have heard the same things over and over again. They have been told what to do every day for hours a day for years. They don't need someone there to watch over them to act right because they act right because they know they should.

We also define ourselves by how we handle failure. If you get dropped from a team, lose a game you feel like you should've won, or just have an off day. How do you react? Do you go home and sulk because you had a bad game? Former athletes understand that they are going to have bad days, but they can't let that be who they are. People who continue to play understand that they are not perfect, and it isn't the end of the world.

Multiple factors go into identity formation through sport, but the main thing is repetition. Repetition can help build the athletes into what they need to be to be successful. They know the drills because they've done them so many times. They know what to do because they're so used to someone telling them what to do. But what happens when there is no one telling you what to do? They do it themselves because their coaches have embedded that discipline into their identity.

So, you stop playing football, but still act like how football players are supposed to act. You spend your time productively because that's what athletes do. You hold yourself to a high-grade standard because coaches expect you to. You push through pain because your team relied on you to play hurt. All these things are true about someone who has an athlete's identity.

But this can be a bad thing if you solely identify as an athlete. What happens when you get injured and can no longer play? What happens when you decide you want to

stop playing? Some people can't handle not playing sports, and they go look for other activities that make them have that athlete's identity. But for most people who played sports, their identity doesn't just vanish because they aren't playing anymore.

Identity formation and identity foreclosure are very similar, but they are not the same thing. If you define yourself only as an athlete and nothing else, you might struggle when it comes to quitting. But forming an identity through sport allows you to be the best you can be at something other than sports.

7. Comparative Perspective: Former Athletes and Non-Athletes in Developmental Outcomes

The differences between people who played organized sport as children and those who did not are fairly illuminating when it comes to figuring out how sports affect kids as they grow up. Of course, any two people who fall into either of those categories will be different in just about every way possible. But as a whole, people who grew up in school systems tend to act and behave similarly to other people who grew up in school systems. They also react similarly to people who were raised in business settings when placed in business settings, and the same goes for pretty much every other environment you could think of. This also applies to people who played sports versus people who didn't. It doesn't mean that one type of person is better than another, but they may behave slightly differently in certain situations. Here are a few examples.

When you're in school sports, you're used to having to be somewhere at a certain time. You have to be at practice, maybe you have to eat at a certain time so you're fueled for practice, and you have to give yourself enough time to rest afterwards. People who don't play sports can definitely learn how to do this, too. But they might not have as much experience managing that kind of routine as someone who played sports does. As kids, they might have had to be somewhere at the same time every day because their parents said so. But once they don't have that oversight, they may find it more difficult to manage their time.

Athletes are used to being tested in their sport. They practice it every day for months on end, and their skills are tested at every game. Not only does this make them comfortable with stressful situations (like competitions), but it also forces them to control their emotions and nervousness. As adults, these skills can translate into playing hockey. People who weren't athletes can also learn how to manage their stress and emotions, but they might not have been challenged as athletes are on a daily basis as teenagers.

If you weren't good about making it to practice on time as a player, your team would have suffered. You learn how to be accountable for your actions when you're playing a sport with a team because people are depending on you. As adults who played sports, we might be more aware of deadlines and our responsibilities to others. People who weren't athletes can learn how to be responsible in college or in the workforce. But the thing is, when you're young, these environments aren't always consistent. Consider

how many times you switched schools in elementary through middle school. Team sports force you to hold yourself accountable in a way that many other activities don't.

This is just a guess, but I'd imagine that people who weren't obsessed with sports had more time to discover what they wanted to do. Whether it be trying new activities or focusing more on academics. Only knowing one sport my whole life didn't allow me to explore many different fields. But that's because I chose to dedicate most of my time to hockey. I know plenty of athletes who were able to do other things, like play music or focus on subjects they enjoyed in school. People who didn't play sports probably had more time to focus on whatever they wanted to in school.

Like I said, just because you played sports doesn't mean you will grow up to have these characteristics. It really depends on the type of environment you were put in. Were you coached by someone who cared about you as a player and a person? Or was it simply go to practice, work hard, and go home? If you didn't have a good experience as a kid playing sports, you may develop some negative characteristics. But that could happen with people who played sports, too. All kids are different, and they can be affected by sports in different ways. However, if you played multiple sports for a long time, you're probably going to have developed some habits from playing.

I think the biggest thing that will affect how kids grow up from playing sports is how long they play. If you started playing hockey at a young age and quit within a couple of years, you probably won't develop many of these characteristics. Your body may remember what it's like to play, but your mind may not, since you didn't play for very long. But if you played for years, your mind and body will develop habits it won't forget. Also, if you grew up in the sport, you likely had a consistent environment. This could be true for kids who didn't play sports but had other hobbies they were good at. As long as they were playing the hobby at a high level for an extended period of time, they'll develop similar characteristics to athletes.

8. Implications for Education, Parents, and Youth Sport Policy

The reframing of youth sport from performance/outcome-focused to developmental/discipline-focused has meaningful consequences for how individuals and organizations think about sport participation as part of larger education and child development discussions. Viewing sport through this lens emphasizes its role in facilitating discipline-building behaviors important for success in later life, but may not be as directly targeted in school settings.

8.1 Implications for Education Systems

School systems are often faced with challenges around student behaviors. From lack of self-control to inability to handle stress or adversity, educators are tasked with teaching students how to behave, but do not always have the capacity to create realistic environments and experiences for students to learn these behaviors. School sport provides an opportunity for students to learn and practice behaviors in a physical way.

School systems should not treat sport as an obstacle to student success but rather a supplemental area for students to learn skills closely tied to success. Students who are better at managing their time, persevering through difficulty, and controlling their emotions are more likely to do well in school and be promoted to higher-level classes. These students are also more likely to find career success later in life. It is important to note that these behaviors should be learned in the context of participation and not performance.

8.2 Implications for Parents and Caregivers

Parents often come to sports with their own ideas about what success and failure look like for their children. If parents are solely focused on their children becoming a successful athlete (at the professional level or otherwise), there is unnecessary pressure placed on the child to perform and often a lack of understanding of the true value of sport participation. This paper has highlighted that the true value of youth sport is the development of discipline through behaviors learned in sport.

Parents should focus on things like showing up and trying their best instead of things they cannot control, like wins, losses, or team positions. Even if your child does not become a professional athlete or the best player on their team, you can be confident that their time in sport was not wasted. You can also help your child by choosing a sports program that has qualified coaches and administrators who focus on providing a structured, fair, and safe environment for your child.

8.3 Implications for Youth Sport Policy

Youth sport programs may benefit from policies that help secure funding and continue program evaluation through better articulated goals than elite performance or international standing. Policies focused solely or primarily on elite development and performance often fail to leave room for programming focused on mass participation. Positioning sport as something that requires long-term investment because of its ability to be a public good down the road may be more effective.

Policies could help ensure the environment is positive for kids to learn discipline by supporting coach education, program consistency, and opportunities for play. Additionally, youth sport programs could be held to a policy-made standard where there are consequences for adults not teaching good sportsmanship, enforcing rules, and allowing children an age-appropriate chance to compete. Finally, policies should change to recognize development (behavioral and psychosocial) as a reason to fund youth sport programs, as opposed to winning being the number one goal.

8.4 Broader Societal Implications

We can also look outside educational and sporting institutions to see how youth sport participation might matter for development. Workforce development, community participation, and social capital are just a few examples of "adult" outcomes that may be

affected by youth sport. Discipline, self-control, and accountability are prized skills in our increasingly complex and unpredictable world. Sports help to develop these skills. Think of sport as part of an informal social infrastructure that works to improve societal outcomes.

Acknowledging that sport positively contributes to behavior later in life also helps us avoid dichotomizing sport participation as either athletic success or failure. If we can view youth sport participation through a developmental lens, then not going pro can still be considered a success in terms of human development. As such, we can begin to change the narrative and stigma surrounding youth sport participation.

9. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to conceptualize youth sport. The aim was not to redefine it, but simply shift the focus away from the single outcome of participating in sport at an elite level as a career. Instead, this paper hopes to persuade individuals to think of youth sport as a system that positively impacts the discipline that individuals experience throughout their lives. When looking at organized sport through the disciplinary perspectives of behaviorism, developmental psychology, and education it becomes clear that there are benefits to playing sports that do not result in becoming a professional athlete.

If discipline can be better understood as a behavior versus a personality trait, then youth sport should be seen as an ideal place to learn how to be disciplined. Sport provides individuals with routine, authority, accountability, and kinesthetic learning. All of these factors allow athletes to learn discipline because they are able to practice it. When athletes are required to go to practice, learn new plays, obey their coaches, and experience success and failure they learn how to better regulate their behavior and emotions. This learning occurs through exposure to stress and allows athletes to learn how to behave responsibly.

The data reviewed indicates that sport allows individuals to learn self-regulation through direct experience. When athletes are routinely exposed to stressful situations and learn how to recover from them, they are able to create neural pathways that will better allow them to behave responsibly within their schooling, jobs, and relationships. What is fascinating about this discovery is that elite status as a performer does not play a factor in this development. As long as that individual was participating in some type of sport during their developmental years and the environment was conducive to learning, they would have had the opportunity to learn discipline.

When compared to non-athletes, the data suggest that athletes are different. They approach life differently and can better self-regulate. However, we cannot simply say that athletes are better than non-athletes. They have just had more opportunities to learn discipline through their experiences as children. Although this paper has found that youth sport can help individuals learn discipline, we cannot assume that all athletes had positive experiences while playing their sport. Just like school, the climate and teacher (coach) play a major role in how children will learn.

Youth sport can be a very important piece to a child's development, but only if the program they are playing for is set up in a manner that will foster development, and the climate is appropriate. But what does this mean for educators, parents, and public policy on youth sport? If people continue to look at sport as something that will help children reach an outcome such as playing sports professionally, they will never discover the benefits that sport can actually have on human development. Youth sport should be seen as a system that helps children learn discipline. When thinking about youth sport this way, it opens the door for schools to help foster that development and see sport as a place worthy of financial investments, even if there are no athletic returns.

Conflict of Interest Statement
The author declares no conflicts of interest.

About the Author(s)
Arman Sargsyan is an independent researcher, youth soccer coach, scout and author specializing in player development, sports psychology, and long-term athlete development. His work focuses on motivational climate, confidence building, and decision-making in youth football, with an emphasis on creating psychologically safe learning environments for young athletes.

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