

WHAT MOTIVATES YOUNG ATHLETES TO PLAY SPORT?

Christopher M. Spray^{1*} and Victoria E. Warburton^{2†}

¹School of Sport, Exercise and Health Sciences, Loughborough University, Loughborough, United Kingdom

²School of Education and Lifelong Learning, University of East Anglia, Norwich, United Kingdom

YOUNG REVIEWERS:



COOPER

AGE: 14



NIKHIL

AGE: 15

Motivation is a key factor in young people choosing to play sport outside of school. For example, when playing sport, you could be concerned with getting better at skills, or you might be more focused on being better than other athletes. Moreover, you could choose to take part in sport because you enjoy it, or you could participate because your parents say so. In this article, we explain these two ways of looking at motivation—one that is all about the goals you strive for, and the other that is all about your reasons for taking part. Sport scientists have used these approaches frequently to understand motivation in youth sport and to promote more rewarding experiences. To stay in youth sport longer, it is better if you want to improve yourself rather than to out-do others, and better if you want to be involved rather than feeling forced to participate.

Motivation is a wonderful thing. It gives you energy and makes you want to do specific activities, like playing organized sport. Millions of young people all over the world engage in competitive sport from

ACHIEVEMENT GOALS

What you aim to do (desire) to feel successful.

MOTIVATIONAL REGULATIONS

Reasons for doing something that show higher or lower quality motivation.

MASTERY GOAL

A desire to get better without comparing yourself to anyone else.

PERFORMANCE GOAL

A desire to be better than others.

an early age, and many continue throughout their teenage years. For some people, sport is a wonderful experience that helps them develop as athletes and as people. For others, their time in sport is short-lived, as they discover it is not what they want or because they feel they are not good enough. So, what influences whether sport is rewarding? In this article, you will read about key features of motivation that help to answer this question. The first section deals with your **achievement goals**, and the second looks at your **motivational regulations**, or reasons for taking part.

GOALS IN SPORT—WHAT ARE YOU TRYING TO ACHIEVE?

Why do some young people participate in sport and excel, while others give up? One answer comes from achievement goal theory [1]. This theory gets its name because there are two different, but sometimes complementary, ways of striving to be good at sport, which are called achievement goals. A goal is something you try to do or aim for, and relates to how you view your own ability. For example, in sport, you might have the goal of wanting to improve your skills—maybe you want to beat your personal record or develop your technique. This is called having a **mastery goal**; you are trying to learn and develop yourself in sport to feel successful. On the other hand, you might have the goal of wanting to be better than everyone else—you want to win or do things faster or more easily than your teammates or competitors. This is called having a **performance goal**; you are trying to show that you are better than others and that is what makes you feel successful in your sport.

Why are these two goals important for understanding whether young athletes stay in sport or quit? Well, these two ways of viewing your ability have very different consequences. When you have a mastery goal, you are focusing on improving your own skills, learning new things, and developing in your sport. You are more likely to enjoy your sport and want to participate. You will feel happy, proud of your efforts, and satisfied with your performance. These feelings make you want to keep going. However, when you have a performance goal, you may be worried about the competition because you do not know if you will be the best or win at your sport. As the group of people that you compare yourself with often changes (because better players join your team, you move up in age group, or other players simply improve faster than you), you can never be sure that you will be among the best. Consequently, you will be less likely to satisfy your goals and more likely to drop out.

Interestingly, young athletes show preferences for either mastery or performance goals, but some will adopt both at various times and in different situations. These athletes often stay longer in sport because they have more than one way of viewing their abilities

and experiencing success. Nevertheless, most young athletes who remain in sport effectively employ mastery goals that are based on self-improvement. They are more interested in the processes of sport performance (techniques and tactics) and less in the outcomes of competition. That is, they constantly want to improve at and master the various elements and demands of their sport, and they will practice and train enthusiastically. The aspect of enjoyment leads to our second way of understanding motivation in youth sport.

MOTIVATIONAL REGULATIONS IN SPORT—WHY ARE YOU TAKING PART?

An alternative way to understand motivation in youth sport is to examine your reasons for taking part. The theory we are going to look at this time is called self-determination theory [2]. This theory involves the idea of motivational regulations, or more simply, your reasons for involvement in sport. These are the answers you give when asked, “why do you play your sport?” Do you participate freely, because you choose to, or because something or someone else has forced you to be involved? Let us look at these reasons in a bit more detail. They are really important because they reflect the quality of your motivation in sport.

What does it mean to have a high quality of motivation in sport? Many of you will say that you love sport, it is great fun, and you really enjoy everything about it. This shows **intrinsic motivation** and is the most positive form of motivation because you want to play sport for its own sake, and you freely choose to play. At the other extreme, it is possible that you do not want to be there, and you cannot see the point of it at all. Although this absence of motivation is more likely to be seen in school physical education settings, it can be present in youth sport if, for example, you are forced to join a sport team by your parents. You might feel you have little ability, or feel you have no friends in sport. These are clearly not good reasons for sticking with sport!

In between these two extremes are several other types of motivation, all of which can be described as **extrinsic motivation**. Types of extrinsic motivation differ in the degree of freedom that you feel playing sport. More freedom equals higher-quality motivation because you want, rather than feel forced, to participate. For example, you might want to play sport because it improves your fitness or allows you to make friends. These are more positive reasons for taking part. Less positively, you might play to please your friends and parents and avoid their disappointment if you drop out. Even worse, you could play sport to avoid punishment from your parents or just to win trophies and other rewards. So, some forms of extrinsic motivation are more desirable than others. The important point is that the more intrinsic your motivation is, or the more it reflects positive extrinsic reasons, the more rewarding sport will be. Without these reasons for playing,

INTRINSIC MOTIVATION

The highest quality of motivation, involving enjoyment and fun.

EXTRINSIC MOTIVATION

Lower quality motivation than intrinsic motivation, not based on the activity itself.

you will probably feel like you do not want to be there, and you will possibly show no motivation whatsoever (Figure 1)!

Figure 1

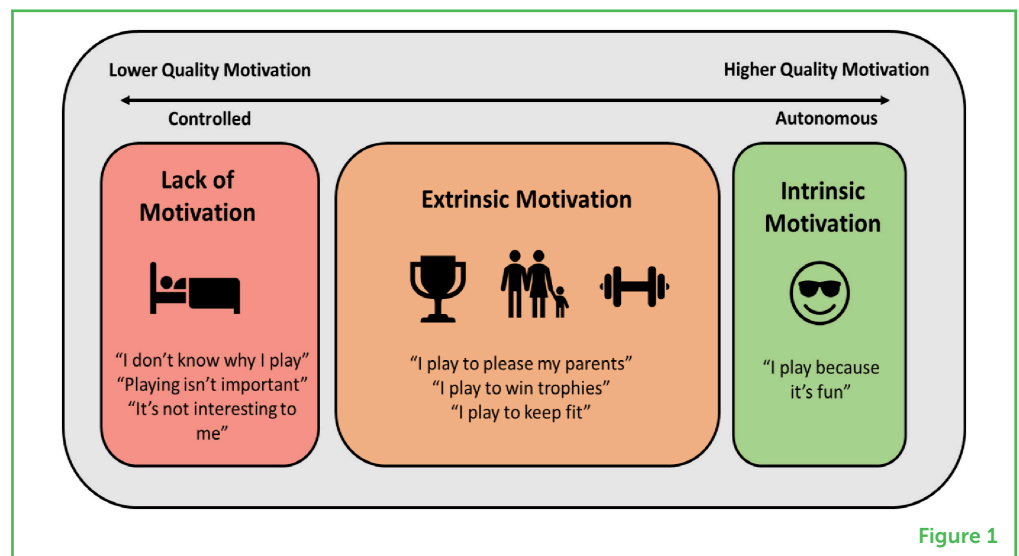
Reasons for playing sport can be more autonomous or more controlling. More feelings of autonomy and fewer feelings of being controlled lead to higher quality motivation. Not all extrinsic reasons are equally bad. Playing to keep fit, for example, is better than playing to win trophies.

AUTONOMOUS REASONS

A feeling that you do something by choice.

CONTROLLED REASONS

A feeling that you are forced to do something.



You will have many reasons for playing sport, and the balance between feeling like you want, should, or must participate will determine the quality of your sport experience. In reality, your involvement in sport is probably a result of both **autonomous** (freely chosen) and **controlled** (forced) reasons. To find sport more rewarding, you want the autonomous reasons to outweigh the controlled reasons. Whether that happens depends a great deal on the adults who support you. Coaches and parents can help you to develop better quality motivation in sport.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, we have shown you two ways of understanding your motivation in sport. These are not the only ways. The take-home message is that sport will be more positive if you try to use mastery goals to develop your skills, and if you experience a feeling of personal choice about being there. With motivation like this, it is more likely that you will only want to stop being involved in youth sport when you become too old to play!

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YOUNG REVIEWERS



COOPER, AGE: 14

Hi my name is Cooper. I love to play basketball and hang out with my friends. I am in grade 9 and my favorite subject is math. I also enjoy drawing and cooking.



NIKHIL, AGE: 15

Nikhil is interested in neuroscience and enjoys learning about the many intricacies of the brain. In his free time he enjoys origami, listening to music, playing the piano and spending time with his dog, and kip.

AUTHORS

CHRISTOPHER M. SPRAY

Dr. Christopher M. Spray is a reader in sport and exercise psychology in the School of Sport, Exercise, and Health Sciences at Loughborough University. Before working in higher education, Chris taught physical education in schools and coached various youth sports. Chris' research interests center on the psychology of physical education and youth sport, and he teaches modules focused on psychology for physical educators. He is a chartered psychologist and associate fellow of the British Psychological Society, and a fellow of the British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences. *c.m.spray@lboro.ac.uk



**VICTORIA E. WARBURTON**

Dr. Victoria E. Warburton is associate professor in psychology of physical education and sport in the School of Education and Lifelong Learning at the University of East Anglia, Norwich. She is a British Psychological Society chartered psychologist, and her main research interest is young people's motivation in physical education and youth sport. Her research has used both achievement goal theory and self-determination theory.

†These authors have contributed equally to this work