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Welcome to Champ Camp: An observational study on the education and preparation of youth athletes for a multi-sport games

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Abstract

Youth multi-sport events offer athletes an opportunity to prepare and train for traditional (adult) multi-sport competitions like the Olympic Games, but simultaneously raises questions as to how athletes train and prepare for the former. Thus, the purpose of this study was to uncover how youth athletes were educated and prepared for a multi-sport games, and whether this preparation was congruent with the circumstances that athletes would encounter. To do so, the Australian Olympic Committee's "Champ Camp" pre-Games summit was observed, documenting the educational training youth athletes received prior to attending the 2018 Buenos Aires Youth Olympic Games. The findings indicate that youth athletes experienced an overload of information that focused on professionalization, and ignored social issues (e.g., sexual health) experienced at the Games. The findings underscore the importance of increasing socialization activities in preparing for a youth multi-sport competition.

Keywords: *Australian Olympic committee, culture and education programme, interactivity, learning, Youth Olympic Games*

Athletic training and pre-competition preparation are essential elements within the high-performance sport context (Brouwers et al., 2015). Many athletes seek to maximize their performance during competition and are able to achieve a "successful" outcome such as winning a competition, breaking a world record, or simply obtaining a new personal best result by focusing on their athletic discipline. However, there remains a knowledge deficiency in some of these training and preparation areas, such as how younger-aged athletes prepare for their athletic experience (cf. MacIntosh et al., 2019a). What exacerbates this issue is that more athlete preparation issues are coming to the forefront. For instance, 46% of elite Australian athletes sampled by Gulliver et al. (2015) have experienced mental health problems, while concerns grow regarding athlete whereabouts during non-athletic training periods, as well as doping and recreational drug use (Mazanov et al., 2015).

Concurrently, there also has been a rise in the number of elite, high-performance sport competitions, especially for younger athlete cohorts. One example of this is the rapid growth in the number of sports activities for those under the age of 18. Multi-sport events such as the African Games, Asian Games, Commonwealth Games, Olympic Games, and Pan American Games all have developed youth or junior sporting competitions to supplement their traditional (adult) offerings. Beyond increasing the exposure of sporting competitions worldwide, including developing sport facilities and generating tourism, these recent developments have had a significant impact on the high-performance development pathway. Indeed, research has suggested that athletic participation at these youth multi-sport events have become a motivating factor for some to remain in elite, high-performance sport in the future (e.g., Kristiansen et al., 2018). However, if these youth multi-sport events

are ostensibly the first-level exposure of traditional, adult offerings (cf. Hanstad et al., 2013), how are youth athletes preparing for the former? There is a significant knowledge gap with youth sport, specifically as it pertains to these major, international events, thus missing critical insights to ensure youth athletes continue to develop along the elite high-performance pathway vis-à-vis deriving significant learnings from their youth multi-sport opportunities (MacIntosh et al., 2019a). Thus, it is imperative to highlight the education and preparation they receive in such instances, particularly as it relates to those emergent social and non-athletic activity issues beyond sport discipline practice, and examine whether or not it is reflective of what youth athletes are experiencing at these types of events. By doing so, practitioners are able to amend their programming and support for youth athletes, and scholars can continue to expand the athlete development and experience literature through a greater understanding of youth athletes.

As such, the purpose of this study was to uncover how youth athletes were educated and prepared for a multi-sport games, and whether this preparation was congruent with the circumstances that athletes encountered. To achieve this purpose, an observational design was employed whereby the researcher was embedded into the educational training and preparation program of youth athletes at one National Olympic Committee (NOC) for an upcoming international multi-sport event. In doing so, this study sought to ascertain whether or not multi-sport event training and preparation sufficiently meets the needs of the modern youth athlete, specifically the alignment between the national sport organization/NOC preparations and the realized youth athlete experience.

Review of Literature

Youth Olympic Games

At the epicenter of the youth multi-sport event movement is the Youth Olympic Games (YOG).

Nearing the end of his term, then-President of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), Jacques Rogge, was concerned with global obesity rates among youth populations and propagated a proposal to develop a global multi-sport event for youth (Judge et al., 2009). Support for this youth movement eventually prevailed, resulting in the first Summer YOG held in Singapore in 2010. But the creation of the YOG simply was not just an Olympic Games for athletes between the ages of 15-18; rather, the purpose of the YOG, beyond promoting youth sport at the highest international standard, was to introduce these athletes to the ideals of Olympism, educating them on the Olympic values of excellence, respect, and friendship, as well as sharing and learning about different cultures (IOC, 2011).

In this capacity, YOG was not conceived as a scaled-down version of the Olympic Games, but instead a platform to celebrate youth sport and introduce the next generation of elite athletes into the Olympic Movement. Rogge himself expressed this view, stating that the YOG is an opportunity for athletes to conduct themselves *like* Olympians (IOC, 2012). *Like* Olympians, not as Olympians. This subtle distinction emphasizes that the YOG is a de facto “training ground” for the Olympic Movement, generating interest in the traditional Olympic Games by offering an Olympic-like opportunity for athletes aged 15-18 (Judge et al., 2009). Hanstad et al. (2013) discussed this notion of the YOG as the first step “in order to become a real Olympian” (p.332). As the authors described, while the YOG can be viewed as a scaled-down version of the traditional Olympic Games from a sponsorship and media standpoint, it still maintains all of the elements of an Olympic Games including clean venues, TOP sponsor exclusivity, opening and closing ceremonies, and athlete’s village living conditions. Hence, YOG athletes may perceive their participation as the precursor to future Olympic Games participation. However, this logic unearths a follow-up question: If the YOG exists as a microcosm of the Olympic Movement, serving to

train youth athletes to become “like” Olympians, how does one prepare for the YOG? To address this question, which is the primary foci of the present study, it is critical to highlight empirical YOG research to date.

Although YOG research has grown, including Hanstad et al.’s (2014) edited collection, research on this particular event has been understudied, largely as it has been less than a decade since its first iteration. Indeed, Judge et al. (2009) were the first to truly highlight the potential benefit (and challenges) of the YOG, while Hanstad et al. (2013) illuminated what the YOG looks like on the ground. In the aftermath of these two studies, more research about this youth multi-sport event emanated. Specifically, more information regarding the cultural and education programme (CEP) came to light. The CEP component enables athletes attending the YOG to immerse themselves in local culture, befriend athletes from other nations, and learn about health, wellness, and social issues (e.g., sustainability) through experiential activities. To encourage CEP participation, YOG athletes were mandated by the IOC to stay for the entirety of the games (Parent et al., 2014). However, athletes have shown dissatisfaction with the CEP’s repetitive activities and unengaging information (Krieger, 2013). Kristiansen (2015) unearthed more to this dissatisfaction, highlighting YOG athletes were unable to fully enjoy the CEP because of the demands and requirements of the athletic competition, and the added stress of missing school for social activities in lieu of additional athletic competitions. By contrast, Peters and Schnitzer (2015) reported that athletes did find value in certain CEP activities, specifically those regarding media training and interviews, as young athletes typically do not encounter media at their events, thus creating a high value learning proposition. Nevertheless, these scholarly examinations seemingly arrive at the same conclusion explicitly outlined by Parent et al. (2014): the YOG is much more than a traditional multi-sport event.

Between the elite athletic training and competition, the “fishbowl” lifestyle in the athletes’ village (e.g., close quarters, roommates), the heightened

levels of security, the repetitive food schedule, the mandatory stay at the event even if the athlete’s competition is completed, and the strongly encouraged cultural and education component, there is just too much activity and experiences for YOG athletes to digest. While many of these elements that are ancillary to competition were designed to be fun, engaging, and educational, the task of balancing non-athletic activities with competition is arduous (Kristiansen, 2017). Many youth athletes who have competed at local, state, or national levels have not previously experienced the norms of a multi-sport event, let alone the cultural and educational components being institutionally driven (e.g., CEP). Youth competitions often are not well publicized and attended, which is the polar opposite of the YOG experience (Peters & Schnitzer, 2015). Thus, there has been a propensity for athletes and their coaches to focus on the athletic competition and learning to become an “Olympian,” as opposed to learning through these seemingly distracting ancillary components (Krieger & Kristiansen, 2016). But, even with this narrow view, athletes participating at the YOG still encounter new, innovative sports formats (Schnitzer et al., 2014) that also can be taxing given their requirements (e.g., working with athletes from another country, increased opportunity for injury). Thus, it is critical that youth athletes are provided an opportunity to learn and anticipate experiences at the YOG, thereby dedicating greater attention to their athletic pursuits and maximizing their participation experience.

(Youth) Athlete Experience

The athlete experience also can be affected by the lead-up to a sport event. As Kristiansen and Roberts (2010) reported, athletes often report strain due to unfavorable environmental conditions. Additionally, MacIntosh et al. (2019a) discussed that athletes reported negative elements during their experience (e.g., physical facilities, amenities, competitors), organization (e.g., NOC), and their personal life (e.g., parents, friends). While it is possible that some of

these issues may reveal themselves at the event itself (Fletcher et al., 2006), it also is important to recognize the support that athletes can receive prior to the event to prepare them for the Games environment, a potentially positive catalyst in improving their eventual athletic performance.

According to Schaefer et al. (1982), there are three key types of support: emotional, tangible, and information. Emotional support refers to the sensitive and compassionate care that others, including organizations, can provide to a person. Services and material goods that can aid in an athlete's preparation are a form of tangible support. Lastly, informational support is that which encompasses documents, training, advice, and other knowledge-based resources. Kristiansen and Roberts (2010) pointed toward these three forms of support as vital to ensuring athlete dissatisfaction is minimized. In examining Norwegian athletes at the European Youth Olympic Festival, the authors concluded that both competition and organizational stressors (e.g., housing, food, transportation) were experienced, and were exacerbated by their adolescence and elite sport competition inexperience. Kristiansen and Roberts concluded that increased attention to the emotional, tangible, and information support is paramount for optimal athletic performance. While coaches and athlete entourages are important sources of emotional and knowledge support, sport organizations like NOCs are significant stakeholders as they can provide the tangible and knowledge support mechanisms that athletes require.

More recent work on the youth athlete experience has expanded on the elements an athlete experiences within a sport event context. Specifically, MacIntosh and Parent's (2017) research proposed that a positive athlete experience is impacted by social and cultural elements, not just physical conditions. In their work, the authors suggested athlete satisfaction was dependent on *organizational* communication, athlete motivation, and destination image perception as initial inputs, feeding athlete expectations prior to the event with social aspects, competition needs, and basic amenities affecting the athlete experience at the

event itself. The initial inputs mentioned are critical antecedents to event satisfaction, and thus should be disseminated and learned by the athlete to assist in athlete preparation for a major competition such as the YOG (MacIntosh & Parent, 2017). What is presented from an organizational perspective (e.g., NOC) can alleviate concerns as new processes, rules, and mechanisms. In turn, athletes can gain greater confidence and manage expectations for the event, enabling focus on their athletic competition and balance engagement with learning and sharing activities (e.g., CEP). As such, it is imperative to look at both the pre-event period, when athletes are learning about the event, and the realized experience at the YOG to assess congruence between preparation and reality. This sentiment connects with the overall purpose of this study, uncovering how youth athletes were educated and prepared for a multi-sport games, and whether this preparation was congruent with the circumstances that athletes encountered.

Method

To uncover how youth athletes were educated and prepared for a multi-sport games, and whether this preparation was congruent with the circumstances that athletes would encounter, an observational design was employed. Observing environments and processes are part of the qualitative tradition, an evolving and increasingly embraced form of inquiry in sport management (Singer et al., 2019). Specifically, such studies enable researchers to observe and be critical of the environment in which they study (Shaw & Hoerber, 2016), which is particularly useful here when discussing the (in)congruence between youth athlete learning and preparation with realized experiences. Though it would have been possible to employ quantitative means (e.g., surveys) or other qualitative methods (e.g., focus groups), observing the entirety of the youth athlete education and preparation process was vital to unearthing key details of the athlete experience, and was the most suitable means to address this study's purpose.

Research Context, Procedure, and Analysis

The research site for this study was the Australian Olympic Committee's (AOC) "Champ Camp," a summit where athletes and coaches gathered to prepare just before the 2018 Buenos Aires YOG. After obtaining research ethics approval, the researcher attended Champ Camp at the invitation of the AOC's Chief Executive Officer and their Head of Games. The selection of the AOC and Champ Camp as a single-shot site for examination was attributable to the expedient selection approach identified by Edwards and Skinner (2009): this NOC was interested in assisting and offered a context that demonstrated key characteristics of interest (i.e., informational support). The mandatory, preparatory meeting for AOC youth athletes and officials took place on the grounds of a private secondary school in Sydney, Australia, in the Fall of 2018. Over a two-day period, 88 athletes (47 female, 41 male) and 62 coaches, attachés, executives, and medical staff educated and prepared for the YOG with a series of talks and informational sessions (see Table 1). After Champ Camp had ended, the entire AOC delegation departed the grounds the next morning, Tuesday, October 2, 2018, and embarked on travel to Buenos Aires.

Table 1

2018 AOC Champ Camp Schedule

Sunday, September 30, 2018	
Time	Activity
8:30 AM	Arrivals and registration (for New South Wales athletes)
9:30 AM - 10:15 AM	Arrivals and registration/bag drop (for interstate athletes)
10:30 AM - 10:55 AM	Team welcome (athletes split into groups A, B, and C)
11:00 AM - 12:00 PM	Outfitting (Group A); Media Skills (Group B); Anti-Doping (Group C)
12:00 PM - 1:30 PM	Lunch
1:30 PM - 2:30 PM	Outfitting (Group B); Media Skills (Group C); Anti-Doping (Group A)
2:30 PM - 2:45 PM	Transition between stations
2:45 PM - 3:45 PM	Outfitting (Group C); Media Skills (Group A); Anti-Doping (Group B)
3:45 PM - 6:00 PM	Free time/Training opportunity
6:00 PM - 8:00 PM	Dinner
7:30 PM	Free time/Watch party for National Rugby League Grand Final

 Monday, October 1, 2018

Time	Activity
6:30 AM - 8:30 AM	Breakfast
Before 8:30 AM	Training (at the discretion of athlete's coaching staff)
8:45 AM	Uniform check (outfit to be worn for team briefing and team farewell)
9:00 AM - 10:30AM	Team briefing (all athletes and officials in lecture theatre)
10:30 AM - 11:30 AM	Olympic athlete panel (for athletes)/Environment brief (for coaches)
11:30 AM - 12:30 PM	Team reception and flag bearer announcement (media present)
12:30 PM - 2:00 PM	Lunch
2:00 PM - 5:00 PM	Free time/Training opportunity
5:00 PM - 6:00 PM	Scenario planning
6:00 PM - 7:30 PM	Early dinner
7:00 PM	Free time/get ready for bed (early departure Tuesday morning)

Accordingly, the sole researcher of this study attended both days of Champ Camp, as well as the 2018 Buenos Aires YOG itself. In the case of the former, the researcher flew to Sydney and began direct observations at first contact with AOC attachés and athletes waiting for others to arrive and buses to depart to the private school grounds. Further observations and field notes were taken during the two-day period, as well as conversations with athletes, attachés, and coaches with different levels of formality (see Edwards & Skinner, 2009). Notes were taken using a pen and notebook, so as to not distract or interrupt the flow of sessions. Additionally, the researcher sat at the back of each session room to observe and not interrupt the sessions. Notes also were recorded post interactions with athletes and coaches in that same notebook. At the end of each day of Champ Camp, the researcher reflected upon the day and marked down additional notes about the delivery and content of information, as well as the athlete, coach, and AOC officials' personalities, mannerisms, and behaviors during sessions. The researcher also was given documentation, access to mobile apps, and other artefacts (e.g., schedules) that youth athletes received.

Once the two-day period was over, the researcher did not immediately travel to Buenos Aires with the AOC athletes and officials but did eventually travel to the YOG for the opening ceremonies and entire duration of the Games. There, discussions with AOC youth athletes commenced using the intercept method in the Youth Olympic Village (MacIntosh et al., 2019b), probing athletes to reflect upon their Champ Camp preparatory experiences and their then-present YOG experiences. Discussions at Champ Camp and the YOG occurred with athletes from a variety of sport disciplines including athletics, basketball, gymnastics, hockey, shooting, and weightlifting, just to name a few; and there was considerable sex and state of origin balance (i.e., males vs. females, Victoria versus Queensland versus New South Wales residents). Once the 2018 Buenos Aires YOG had ceased, the researcher commenced the data analysis phase of the study. The collection of data via observations, interviews, and document analyses achieved methodological saturation that is critical for qualitative research (Denzin, 2009).

Overall, the researcher produced 20 full pages of written notes, collected key important artefacts

(i.e., Champ Camp official schedule, AOC YOG documents), and gathered direct quotes from officials and executives delivering sessions, ensuring a rich and in-depth data capture (Denzin, 2009). To analyze all the data collected, the researcher utilized open-coding techniques, followed by concentration into higher order categories, following the work of Parent et al. (2014) who employed similar qualitative techniques in their observation of the 2012 YOG in Innsbruck, Austria. The process here began with a review of all notes stemming from observations, interviews, and artefacts, separating Champ Camp and the YOG experiences. Then, data were gathered by valence similarities, and then eventually concentrated into the higher-order level. This process allowed the researcher to demonstrate ongoing reflexivity and interpretation when documenting the education and preparation of the AOC's YOG athletes, important principles to consider given that qualitative designs are not absolved from researcher biases (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2010). The results were presented from the researcher's observations from Champ Camp and the 2018 YOG, with quotations reflecting verbatim communication from AOC staff or athletes as explicitly indicated.

Results

The first major theme that emerged from Champ Camp was the mundane institutionalization and information overload. From the moment athletes and coaches stepped on the chartered bus for the Champ Camp grounds, there was a dreary, monotone feel. The first "lecture" was given by John Coates, AOC President, and Evelyn Halls, the Chef de Mission. It was during this introductory meeting (where athletes sat at the back of the 230-seat theatre until forced to move up to the first rows) where many numbers, statistics, and buzzwords were thrown toward the athletes, including the number of athletes representing the AOC, total number of NOCs participating at the YOG, and the total number athletes participating at the YOG, among others; it was impressed upon the athletes that the "Olympics are an enterprise," and

that it was critical to "absorb that info" that the AOC was going to provide to the athletes at Champ Camp. At this first meeting, the AOC's operations manager made it clear to the athletes that, again, the mobile applications were "critical for updated information and to track whereabouts," but also that it was a closed camp (i.e., entourage prohibited) and that there was to be no gender mixing. Furthermore, there was barely any mention of Buenos Aires as a host city besides a quick statement about the high number of volunteer applications and free tickets given to school-aged children, nor was there in-depth information provided about the CEP beyond a minor mention of "opportunities" that exist that athletes would "find out about" when they were at the YOG.

On the second day of Champ Camp, the institutionalization and information overload persisted, with more briefings from key AOC officials in the large lecture space. Halls, again, discussed the numbers of staff, executives, attachés, and medical staff, before briefly continuing a brief account of the Olympic values (which many athletes looked disinterested in hearing), and indicated all information could be found in the WhatsApp group created for the team. The cavalcade of AOC staff continued to barrage the athletes in the 230-seat lecture theatre with information, including additional notes about the YOG village, security, and medical care. Specifically, the athletes were told what they could *not* look forward to: good Wi-Fi, TVs (for the AOC after an incident at the 2012 London Summer Olympic Games), mixed-sex floors, and using their own SIM cards (as the AOC provided Argentinean SIM cards with limited internet capabilities for emergencies only). Athletes also were informed of specific dates and times when they could meet their entourages and celebrate with Australian embassy officials stationed in Buenos Aires. Throughout these instances, athletes were disengaged, not taking notes (they were not provided with stationary or writing utensils for any of these sessions), and not actively involved in the learning process (no questions were asked in the large lecture theatre setting at any point over the two days). Instead, athletes simply were ushered into the venues

and spoken to, not with. Even when AOC officials attempted to lighten the mood with sarcastic quips, such as one occasion where an attaché “thanked” Australian flight carrier Qantas for the unfavorable itinerary, the mood throughout Champ Camp was mundane and monotonous.

Related, a second theme to emerge from Champ Camp was the concentrated focus on professionalizing the youth athletes. On both days, there were video montages of AOC athletes at recent Summer Olympic Games in Rio and PyeongChang, with a clear attempt at cultivating a culture of staying “focused and professional.” References to the (adult) Olympic Games were raised on several occasions, including AOC President Coates’ remarks about using the YOG as a platform for Tokyo 2020 and beyond (even referring to a possible Brisbane bid for the 2032 Olympic Games). In fact, Halls told the athletes on the second day of camp point blank, “we don’t want to labor the point, but you are representing the country and previous Olympians before you.” She also explained to the athletes that because the YOG experience was set up like a “full scale Olympics,” “until you’re there, you won’t know what it’s like.” To this end, Halls briefly mentioned mental preparedness, asking athletes to “check-in” and “find a quiet space” if they did not “feel quite right.” The professionalization sentiment also was captured by several elite athletes coming in to speak to the youth athletes. One block of time in the lecture theatre was dedicated to a panel that featured current elite athletes Jess Thornton, Brandon Starc, and Bronte Campbell, all of whom had competed at a Commonwealth Games or Olympic Games and had previous experience at a YOG or youth multi-sport event, demonstrative of the possibilities for the current crop of youth athletes. These elite athletes shared their insights on travelling long distances for events, injury maintenance, and the psychology of elite athletes at multi-sport events (e.g., “trust the process,” “embracing the moment”). Beyond guest speakers, AOC officials also referred to themselves as the “fun police” as they informed the youth athletes of their 7:00 PM YOG village curfew, 10:00 PM nightly routines, and 10:30 PM sleep

schedule, attempting to “create a high-performance environment” and reduce instances of athletes “partying” and “breeding” (references explicitly made by an AOC official to athletes about sexual activity).

Along this vein, breakout sessions on the first day of camp were designed to ensure the youth athletes were educated and knowledgeable about guidelines and procedures at the YOG. One session, organized by ASADA, the Australian anti-doping agency, taught the youth athletes about banned substances, therapeutic exceptions, and reminded the athletes to stay focused on themselves to ensure no violations – it was impressed upon the athletes that while Russia had been stripped of 41 medals for doping, Australia had a clean record. Another session led by the AOC social media coordinator focused on preparing athletes for media interviews and teaching proper (social) media etiquette. Specifically, athletes were encouraged to use social media but to employ “common sense” as social was “not worth the distraction”; a video montage of AOC (adult) Olympians was shown with gold medal swimmer Cate Campbell talking about how the support she views on social media sometimes turns to pressure. Athletes also were told not to complain about YOG elements (e.g., village), officiating/results, or any of the local politics or riots via media interviews or social media as it could “affect [them] for 2020 or 2024.” Indeed, while the breakout sessions were informative (although the athletes were once again directed to the team’s mobile app for the AOC media policy and the ASADA mobile application for supplement checking), there was a distinctive professional element throughout Champ Camp, ensuring athletes were being trained and educated in key areas of elite, high-performance sport.

The third and final theme was the absence of experiential activities. As previously mentioned, there was a monotonous but professional tone throughout Champ Camp, but that also was due in part to the lack of opportunities given to athletes to connect with one another and engage with the informational content. The youth athletes did not ask many questions of the AOC officials/speakers, including the Commonwealth and Olympic athletes that were brought in to speak

to the group. The most engaging informational experience was the anti-doping session where ASADA utilized virtual reality technology and the Google Daydream headset to simulate a first-person experience of drug testing post competition at YOG. This innovation was well-received, and two athletes per breakout group were afforded the opportunity to experience the simulation. The anti-doping session also featured some role-playing activities for the athletes, pretending to adjudicate on doping scenarios of the past. Ironically, there was no engagement to the media training session, and certainly not in any of the mass speeches to the entire youth athlete cohort. Pragmatically, the only opportunities for athletes to meet one another were during the lunch periods (where athletes congregated with their teammates, coaches, or those in their sport discipline) and during free periods (which became de facto training sessions). Although the Champ Camp organizers embedded a “team bonding” opportunity with a rugby match watch party at the end of day one, this was a big ask given the athletes’ exhaustion from flying to Champ Camp in the morning, and a full day of education and training. The activity that offered the most amount of camaraderie and spirit was the official outfitting breakout station, also on day one. However, even this activity was subdued. Despite having a social media rig with props and professional multimedia setup (e.g., step-and-repeat banner, lightning) for interviews with the athletes, the outfitting sessions were anti-climactic, as only four male and four female athletes could get their gear at a time. Size selection was limited, athletes were exchanging garments, and change rooms were full, all attributing to this uninspiring experience. Across the entirety of camp, there were two specific instances where some semblance of team spirit was found: (1) a team photo with the announced flag bearer and the Sydney harbor in the background, and (2) when an AOC official remarked that because golf and sailing athletes were competing at venues far away, the team should “raid the shit” out of the food hall and bring back items for their teammates. Yet, there remained a lack of opportunity to meet one another, exchange ideas about training or competing

at the YOG, or simply socialize about non-athletic issues.

In the aftermath of Champ Camp, youth athletes did not shy away from highlighting where the summit could be improved. When asked, some athletes claimed Champ Camp was “okay,” but that the best part of the summit “was the uniform fitting and everything else was second.” This disinterest in the content that the AOC presented (and perhaps the manner in which they had presented) also appeared when athletes discussed the lack of opportunities to meet their teammates and the overall “rushing” that took place at camp. One proposal put forward by an athlete was to extend Champ Camp by a day; knowing that the AOC officials and athletes had to fly to the YOG on Tuesday, one suggestion was to start Champ Camp on Saturday, introduce some initial briefings and team bonding activities, and spread content over an elongated period. The youth athlete informants also spoke about the unexpected circumstances they were experiencing at the YOG. Many of the athletes talked about the CEP, but mostly for its impromptu opportunities to meet athletes from other countries or another sport. Youth athletes also remarked that the CEP was great in facilitating mixing and culture exchange with other athletes, especially the informal activities like table tennis, table soccer, and futsal with other athletes and volunteers. Unsurprisingly, athletes also remarked about the poor variance in food and lack of storage in the accommodations. Unexpectedly, athletes brought up a few issues unprovoked. One such issue was the “bowls of condoms” in the athlete village that depleted in quantity and were re-stocked every so often. One of the athletes indicated that not only were these contraceptives freely available (confirmed through researcher observation) but went further and claimed to personally have engaged in sexual activity with a fellow Australian athlete, as well as a non-Australian athlete. Another “experience” that was flagged was the viewing of athletes (from other countries) engaging in illegal, recreational drug use. It was explained that an athlete (and his coach no less) were seen smoking marijuana atop the roof of a YOG accommodation building, and eventually were dismissed from

the YOG altogether (anecdotally, this information was confirmed by an AOC attaché and another NOC official at the YOG with knowledge of the incident). Finally, and interconnected to the previous two circumstances, athletes discussed the pervasiveness of gossip, rumor, and speculation within the village. Some athletes spoke about how, during downtime periods, athletes would discuss rumors passed along from other athletes.

Discussion

There is a lot to unpack from Champ Camp and its congruence with the athlete experience on the ground in Buenos Aires. Reviewing Schaefer et al.'s (1982) forms of support, there was certainly no shortage of tangible and informational support. The AOC provided significant tangible resources to athletes at Champ Camp and at the YOG – they arranged flights, visas, food, and Argentinean SIM cards, among others. This is not surprising and what athletes and other stakeholders would expect of an NOC. The AOC also provided youth athletes with significant informational support. Champ Camp featured elite athlete panels, team briefings, and anti-doping and media skills workshops all designed to provide informational support. However, the amount of emotional support afforded to these athletes, as gleaned from Champ Camp, was questionable. Besides the brief aside about athletes “checking in” and finding “quiet space,” there was no deliberate mention of mental health or care, which especially is concerning given the rise of such symptoms in elite Australian athletes (Gulliver et al., 2015). What exacerbates this issue is the lack of explicit mention about mental health policies or procedures is highly problematic given these athletes are young adults, aged 15-18.

Complications arise when considering the type of informational support that youth athletes received at Champ Camp. Certainly, the argument can be made that too much information was presented to the athletes, but information frequency was just one half of the issue; the type of information presented to these youth athletes was narrow and limited in scope.

This is not to say the information presented was not useful, nor should they be removed from the athlete training and preparation for the YOG. For instance, exposing youth athletes to information about media is important (Hanstad et al., 2013). Similarly, anti-doping policies are essential knowledge for youth athletes to reduce the potential for disqualification and adverse health effects; MacIntosh et al. (2019a) have indicated that youth athletes are satisfied with a multi-sport event when provided with appropriate anti-doping information. However, these two informational breakout sessions are demonstrative of a focus on athletic professionalization, ostracizing other important issues for young persons; there were no mentions of sponsorship activation or how to go about using social media, an important media issue in the Olympic movement (cf. Abeza et al., 2014; Naraine & Parent, 2017). Additionally, academic support already has been identified as an important concern for youth athletes that can be mitigated with appropriate NOC, family, and school support (Kristiansen, 2017). Yet, there were no mentions of academics, school, or studying during Champ Camp. This is highly problematic given these athletes will return to school after the YOG, and some will even pursue post-secondary education. Whether educational resources were provided to these athletes behind the scenes is unknown, but no explicit mention of education is a missed opportunity.

At Champ Camp, there were no workshops or official outlets for athletes to exchange ideas or share experiences in a safe, comfortable setting pertaining to mental health, sexual health, or downtime. As alluded to above, mental health is becoming a more pertinent issue among young athletes (MacIntosh et al., 2019a). But beyond mental health is the “elephant in the room”: sexual health. Sex often is disassociated from the Olympic Games given the event is predicated on athletic performance, but this does not mean athletes refrain from sexual activities at these elite sport gatherings. In 2018, 110,000 condoms were distributed in bowls across the 2018 PyeongChang Winter Olympic Games village (Dawson, 2018). Now, just because organizers provide athletes with contraception does not equate to automatic and total

usage. However, providing contraception is an acknowledgement that sexual activity may occur. At the YOG level, this acknowledgement also exists, given the indication that “condom bowls” were present and replenished. However, youth athletes were not told at Champ Camp that such bowls would exist, nor were there any informational resources provided on the topic of sexual health. This particularly is concerning given the influence of peers in the youth athlete experience (Kristiansen et al., 2017). Resources about relationships, balancing sport with significant others, and practicing safe sex should be provided during athlete preparation; NOCs should be equally concerned of their athlete’s sexual health given that such activity also can impact and affect their physical and emotional well-being and, ultimately, their athletic performance.

This sentiment also applies to the connected issue of preparing athletes for downtime. As was the case with sexual activity by youth athletes, an unexpected occurrence at the YOG was the alleged and later confirmed deviance displayed by an athlete and his coach smoking marijuana in the village. The use of recreational drugs was not a topic covered at Champ Camp either, mostly because it was implied during the anti-doping session regarding drug testing. But the presence of marijuana in the village suggests that perhaps more explicit commentary on what athletes should (and should not) be doing during their downtime is warranted. As the YOG also have mandated youth athletes stay in the village even after their competitions have concluded (Parent et al., 2014), this leaves room for social pursuits. Related, alcohol and cannabis (that which contains no tetrahydrocannabinol) were not prohibited substances in 2018 (Pavitt, 2017), and alcohol legally could be consumed by persons 18 years of age or older in Argentina. Thus, as some YOG athletes are 18 years old (Judge et al., 2009), it would have been possible for athletes to travel outside the village and engage in such behaviors and consumption. These issues are notable concerns that athletes experienced (Mazanov et al., 2015), but were absent from the preparatory

discussions.

The Champ Camp summit also did not provide adequate emotional support vis-à-vis mentioning YOG social opportunities or offering team building and camaraderie activities to the youth athletes in attendance. One of the key features of the YOG that is oft cited by athletes as a success is the CEP (Peters & Schnitzer, 2015). Yet, the Champ Camp sessions did not explicitly mention these details. Krieger’s (2013) work suggested that youth athlete dissatisfaction with the CEP emanated from repetitive activity, but this also can be exacerbated by not knowing about the CEP altogether. The Champ Camp schedule featured minimal opportunities to meet other athletes, those being eating periods and “free time” breaks. An impromptu setting for connecting also was the uniform outfitting breakout session but, still, these incidents were few and far between. Moreover, these limited connection windows assume that youth athletes aged 15-18 are natural extroverts, openly willing to meet new people and share their experiences. However, the observed behaviors at Champ Camp indicate otherwise. Specifically, youth athletes tended to congregate with others in their sport discipline (e.g., male trampoline athlete sitting with a female trampoline athlete) and/or with those they knew from previous experiences (such as from training at a state or local sport institute). Anticipating that teenagers naturally will speak to one another without facilitating appropriate means to do so illustrates another example of the absence of social support provided by the AOC.

These details highlight the narrow and conservative preparation that youth athletes experienced prior to the YOG, a potential catalyst on their stress levels prior to the event. Here, the AOC subscribed to an imbalance of YOG training that featured an overload of uninspiring, unengaging information, and none of the additional educational and socializing activities that youth athletes require (Krieger & Kristiansen, 2016). Subscribing to this sentiment isolates the athletic component of these athletes, but also negates their humanity; these youth are not just athletes, they are persons who are learning, sharing, and begin-

ning to think critically. By choosing to remain silent on non-athletic issues, NOCs put the learning onus back on the individual athlete (and to their entourage to some extent), which is a dangerous ploy. Absolving themselves from non-athletic preparation of youth athletes facilitates the athletes' nerves and potential uninformed perceptions about the destination and the competition environment, which also includes elements like CEP. Additionally, by not crafting a more engaging, more experiential set of training sessions, NOCs also risk increasing the stress levels for their athletes in the lead-up to the event; overloading youth athletes with informational support can have an adverse effect.

Theoretical Implications

Although this study did not quantitatively assess stress or satisfaction levels, it complements and adds to the growing foundation of literature on the (youth) athlete experience. Specifically, when scholarship seeks to understand the factors that help shape the athlete experience at a multi-sport competition (cf. Parent et al., 2014; MacIntosh et al., 2019b), it is important to recognize the inputs, not just the throughputs or outputs. Here, the findings indicate that there is an imbalance in the type of support athletes receive, and that it can have an impact on how they frame, process, and internalize experiences on the ground. Moreover, these preparations can be inherently stressful and add more strain on the youth athlete experience even before attending the event altogether. As such, the findings of this study add to our theoretical understanding of the youth athlete experience by expanding upon when the experience actually starts (i.e., not just the focal sport event, but the precursors to competing) and considering the support offered, which could impact the realized experience.

Practical Implications

Practically, this study offers important take-aways for those who are in the elite, high-perfor-

mance sport context. There needs to be greater recognition of the educational and socialization component of athlete preparation and training. It is not enough just to prepare athletes from a media and anti-doping perspective in the modern landscape. Practitioners must confront the reality that athlete preparation is more than just athletics; it's also about the athlete's personal growth and "work"-life balance. This does not detract away from the vision of elite athletics – if anything, offering these services and training makes the athlete more complete, more aware of the "elements." Table 2 provides a sample proposal of how these non-athletic issues can be woven into the traditional preparation structure. In this proposal, there are blocks of time dedicated to the fundamentals (e.g., athletic training, media skills) and opportunities for team bonding and learning (e.g., talent shows). Concomitantly, the findings of this study also imply that practitioners focus on adding engaging, innovative techniques to enhance athlete engagement and make the preparation and learning process more enjoyable. The use of virtual reality headsets like the Google Daydream to simulate the multi-sport event environment and its elements (e.g., media scrums, village food halls) is a high-value proposition in which sport organizations should continue their investment.

Table 2

Proposed Future Champ Camp Schedule

Day 1	
Time	Activity
8:00 AM - 9:30 AM	Arrivals and registration
10:00 AM - 11:00 AM	Team welcome (athletes split into Group A and B)
11:00 AM - 12:00 PM	Team building exercises
12:00 PM - 1:15 PM	Lunch
1:30 PM - 2:30 PM	Media skills (Group A); Anti-doping (Group B)
2:30 PM - 2:45 PM	Transition between stations
2:45 PM - 3:45 PM	Media skills (Group B); Anti-doping (Group A)
3:45 PM - 6:00 PM	Free time/training opportunity
6:00 PM - 8:00 PM	Dinner
8:00 PM - 9:00 PM	Board games/evening activity
Day 2	
Time	Activity
7:00 AM - 8:00 AM	Breakfast
Before 8:00 AM	Training (at the discretion of athlete's coaching staff)
8:15 AM - 9:15 AM	Team bonding session
9:30 AM - 11:00 AM	Uniform outfitting (Group A); Mental and sexual health (Group B)
11:00 AM - 12:30 PM	Uniform outfitting (Group B); Mental and sexual health (Group A)
12:30 PM - 1:30 PM	Lunch
2:00 PM - 3:00 PM	Team briefing (all athletes and officials in lecture theatre)
3:00 PM - 4:30 PM	YOG village environment (food, accommodation, security)
4:30 PM - 6:00 PM	Free time/training opportunity
6:00 PM - 8:00 PM	Dinner
8:00 PM - 9:00 PM	"Australian Athletes Got Talent" show/evening activity

 Day 3

Time	Activity
7:00 AM - 9:00 AM	Breakfast
Before 9:00 AM	Training (at the discretion of athlete's coaching staff)
9:15 AM - 10:15 AM	Team bonding session
10:30 AM - 12:00 PM	Olympic athlete panel (for athletes) + uniform check
12:00 PM - 1:30 PM	Team reception and flag bearer announcement (media present)
1:30 PM - 2:30 PM	Lunch
3:00 PM - 6:00 PM	Free time/training opportunity
6:30 PM - 8:00 PM	Dinner and Champ Camp awards

Conclusion

Champ Camp is a good idea. Readers of this study should not come away with an understanding that athlete preparation and training prior to the YOG or any other youth multi-sport competition is detrimental to athletic performance. However, the observed findings of this study suggest that Champ Camp's execution was lacking. In particular, youth athletes were educated and prepared for a multi-sport game with a conservative approach that emphasized a narrow set of information with limited interactivity, opting for professionalization over socialization. Additionally, the training athletes received was not congruent with what was encountered at the 2018 Buenos Aires YOG, forcing athletes to experience circumstances for which they may have been unequipped to handle. Yet, having a Champ Camp altogether remains better than not having a Champ Camp. The researcher was made aware that many athletes attending the YOG representing other NOCs did not have the luxury of their NOC preparing a pre-Games preparation summit or the like; rather, they just showed up in Argentina "blind" and experienced it all in the moment. This proposition puts the learning and education onus on the IOC which, while useful for poorly resourced NOCs, does not maximize or mitigate the unknown for youth athletes with little elite, high-performance competition experience. For developed NOCs like the AOC, having the resources to offer a Champ Camp for their athletes certainly is beneficial, but the findings here suggest there is much more that can be done such that athletes truly maximize their pre-Games training and their realized experiences at the competition.

Ultimately, the findings of the study highlight an inconvenient truth for NOCs and youth sport organizations: the YOG are not necessarily about producing future Olympians; they are about producing better, more complete athletes. Certainly, having a pipeline for Olympic talent is important, but not all YOG athletes will go on to compete at the Olympic Games. But instead of trying to hyper-focus youth into a streamlined, robotic high-performance mold, NOCs should consider accepting that the YOG is more than just a Games (Parent et al., 2014) and that helping these athletes achieve balance is as important to their long-term elite athlete development (Kristiansen, 2017).

Limitations

While this study has produced some unique, innovative revelations, it is not without its limitations. First, as alluded to earlier, this study did not feature quantitative testing. Specifically, this study did not decipher the degree to which preparatory sessions in the pre-Games training period were dissatisfactory or negatively contributed to this experience. Second, the study was focused on the education and preparation of one NOC and its youth athletes attending the 2018 Buenos Aires YOG. It is quite possible that education and training at other NOCs differs from what was experienced at Champ Camp, and it also is possible that the AOC has different education and training for its youth athletes for non-YOG competitions. Finally, the study was limited to an observational design. One of the reasons for this choice was the non-intrusiveness of this method, as well as the stipulations imposed by the AOC. However, the takeaways from the pre-YOG training could have been different for other athletes who found significant value in the preparation and training of Champ Camp. Concurrently, information provided by the youth athlete informants could have been hyperbole, and the researcher's inherent biases could have impacted the nature and extensiveness of notes taken, as well as their interpretation. Though methodological triangulation occurred with a mixture of methods including interviews and observations (Denzin, 2009), it is critical to highlight the implicit researcher bias at play.

Future Directions

The findings and limitations of this study offer insights into the next steps for scholarly examination. It would be prudent for future studies to quantify the stress levels of athletes before participating in a multi-sport event like the YOG. By doing so, scholars and practitioners will be able to decipher between elements and identify, for instance, whether education and socialization activities are more stressful than the destination image perceptions or athletic training,

enabling modification to pre-Games preparation regimens. Along this vein, athlete experience research should strongly consider the inclusion of mental health issues as a symptom or outcome of negative experiences, dissatisfaction, and/or stress. Additionally, it is important to consider adding multiple cases (e.g., more than one NOC) into the methodological design of future studies. Determining the similarities and differences of (youth) athlete preparation across NOCs and other national sport federations can determine whether the conservative focus is systemic or isolated. Finally, work in this space should continue, as youth multi-sport events are hosted in non-traditional locales. With the 2026 Summer YOG scheduled to take place in Dakar, Senegal, this would appear ripe for a follow-up examination, particularly in light of the COVID-19 global health pandemic and its impact on sport (Mastromartino et al., 2020).

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