

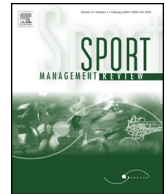


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# “But a champion comes out much, much later”: A sport development case study of the 1968 U.S. Olympic team

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### ABSTRACT

Increasing attention has been given to the effective development of elite athletes. In this inquiry, the authors used a historical case study to ascertain the ways elite athletes were developed in a different era of sport in the United States. Using the attraction, retention, and transition frameworks, the factors that fostered the development of athletes from the 1968 Summer Olympics were drawn out through oral history interviews. In total, interviews with 59 U.S. Olympians were conducted. The results reveal how the athletes experienced supportive recruitment and retention environments, were able to manage the difficulty of developing elite talent, and encountered both challenges and opportunities transitioning through and out of elite sport. This analysis demonstrates how sport development principles are diverse in their temporal relevance and reinforce the practical implications meant to serve the modern athlete. Further, at least some sport development principles could remain constant regardless of how context and elite athlete experiences evolve in the future.

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## 1. Introduction

National governing bodies for sport in the United States are tasked with two primary responsibilities: developing participation and developing excellence. These two responsibilities have been connected and depicted in pyramid models of sport development. In such models, an extensive foundation of mass participation should allow for the identification and development of elite participants. In order for pyramid-type systems to function, stakeholders must be able to recruit participants into the sport, retain and help them become more committed to the sport, and support them as they transition to different environments and increasingly more elite stages of the sport (Green, 2005). While simplistic in its presentation, the pyramid analogy gives the misleading impression that athlete development is structured and efficient, with well-defined routes from entry to elite levels. Rather than being efficient in nature, the U.S. sport system has been described as fractured and disordered (Chalip, 2011; Sparvero, Chalip, & Green, 2008).

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As it has further transformed over time, the sport development system in the United States has become even more complicated. Yet, athletes seem to encounter many of the same challenges they have always met. Working with members of a U.S. Olympic team, we use historical data to better realize how athlete experiences have evolved in the U.S. sport system and led to the current sport climate. The analysis will allow for an understanding of how elite sport impacted the participant (Shilbury, Sotiriadou, & Green, 2008). We address the limited historical sport development data collected thus far and convey the multifaceted sport development processes that occurred with these Olympic athletes, including which stakeholders influenced their development, in what ways at each developmental stage, and how those practices impacted their pathways in reaching the pinnacle of their sports (Sotiriadou, Shilbury, & Quick, 2008).

Historical scholarship is essential to future sport management research and practice (Amis & Silk, 2005). Historical analysis does not disregard contemporary issues that dominate sport management discourse, but helps facilitate better managerial solutions and implications with a more extensive consideration of history and context. In order to alter the status quo, it is critical to recognize that sport stakeholders, and the issues they affect, operate within complex sociopolitical realities that are historically entrenched (Frisby, 2005). As De Wilde, Seifried, and Adelman (2010) noted, understanding phenomena through a historical lens helps prevent sport managers from holding shallow or traditional viewpoints and acknowledge that present circumstances are not simply the product of informal or market forces but the decisions made in the past. By understanding context, which often heavily influences the trajectory of many sport organizations, the relationship between past events and modern conditions can be uncovered to help generate new solutions for future practice (Seifried, 2010).

The purpose of this study is to illustrate the ways elite athletes were developed in a different era of sport in the United States and demonstrate how sport development principles are diverse in their temporal relevance and reinforce the practical implications that stem from this area of research. This paper is divided into the following sections: the first offers the sport development frameworks that guided the research; the second section contextualizes the study by describing notable differences in the U.S. sport culture since the 1968 Summer Olympics and the critical need for historical analysis; the third section discusses the methods used to collect and analyze the data provided by members of the 1968 U.S. Olympic Team; the fourth section provides the representative themes that emerged from the data and quotes for illustration; the fifth section offers a discussion to highlight the theoretical and practical implications; and the final section presents a brief conclusion to this inquiry.

## 2. A sport development framework

The principle focus of sport development is to understand the issues that encourage sport participation and the most effective approaches to market the opportunities and benefits of participation (Shilbury et al., 2008). Globally, sport development decisions have continued to be rendered by governments, sport governing bodies, and other policymaking sources in order to achieve broader policy goals (Green & Oakley, 2001; Houlihan & Green, 2008). The intentions of these decisions have often been represented in pyramid models of sport development. In such models, policymakers and sport managers concentrate on the base of the pyramid and increasing mass sport participation. With a wider foundation of participation, there are more opportunities to develop talented participants' abilities and channel them up towards elite levels of competition, depicted at the apex of the pyramid (Green, 2005). The desired effects of the pyramid approach include a more active population, which results in economic benefits from a healthier citizenry, and prestige and pride among the population as a result of having a larger talent pool to select athletes for elite level training and competition. Pyramid models, however, are unable to capture the highly complex pathways talented participants have taken to reach elite levels of their sport (Green, 2005; Shilbury et al., 2008). Such complex pathways have existed for generations of athletes. In order for a sport system to effectively and efficiently produce elite athletic talent, the attraction, retention, and transition frameworks must be understood (Sotiriadou et al., 2008).

Described also as recruitment, entrance, or introduction, attraction denotes the means by which individuals commence their participation in a sport (Green, 2005; Sotiriadou et al., 2008). As Sotiriadou et al. (2008) explained, the attraction process aims to increase awareness and participation among general participants while cultivating large numbers of new participants who have the potential to eventually become elite performers. Previous researchers have revealed several significant issues for why an individual may select a particular sport over other uses of discretionary time. The support of valued social influences is often an important encouragement to become a sport participant (Baker, Horton, Robertson-Wilson, & Wall, 2003; Fraser-Thomas, Cote, & Deakin, 2008). While significant social influences will be different for each individual, examples include coaches, friends, siblings, spouses, and parents. Such influences can affect an athlete's motivation, training habits, acceptance of coaching, leadership skills, and decision making (Burgess & Naughton, 2010). Further, both potential participants and even their social influences will often consider the prospect for new or stronger relationships in deciding to play a sport (Green, 2005). Social interaction through sport participation, however, may often be disregarded by program leaders, who instead focus on the sport's training procedures or competition results (Sotiriadou, Wicker, & Quick, 2014). The accessibility of the sport is also critical to participants selecting sport over other uses of their time (Fraser-Thomas, Cote, & Deakin, 2005). If safety is a concern or long travel is required in order to participate, individuals are less likely to be recruited into that sport (Gillard & Witt, 2008).

Successfully attracting participants into a sport then enables retention efforts to commence (Sotiriadou et al., 2008). Retention refers to participants progressing from simply trying a sport to becoming regularly involved and committed to that

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