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Body size and perceptions of coaching behaviors by adolescent female athletes

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Abstract

Objectives: To investigate relations among body size, perceptions of coaching behaviors, and attitudes toward the coach and sport in adolescent female athletes in three sports.

Design: Field correlational design.

Method: Female athletes, 14–18 years, participating in high school basketball, gymnastics, and soccer ($N=227$) completed questionnaires dealing with the perceived frequency of coaching behaviors, evaluative reactions to the coach, and liking for the sport. Coaches rated the ability and performance of each athlete during the season.

Results: Partial correlations between indicators of body size and athlete perceptions of coaching behaviors, controlling for age and ratings of ability and performance, varied by sport. Among gymnasts, measures of body size were associated with less positive and supportive interactions with coaches and less liking for the coach. Contrary to expectations, the stature of the basketball players was unrelated to their perceptions of coaching behaviors or their liking for the coach and sport. Body size was unrelated to athlete perceptions of coaching behaviors and evaluative responses in soccer.

Conclusions: In support of [Petersen, A. C., & Taylor, B. (1980). The biological approach to adolescence: Biological change and psychological adaptation. In J. Adelson (Ed.), *Handbook of adolescent psychology* (pp. 117–155). New York: Wiley–Interscience.] Mediated Effects Model of Psychological Adaptation to Puberty, the results suggest that body size, even with age, ability and performance held constant, may engage sport specific

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stereotypes that influence coaches' positive and negative behaviors, particularly in sports where body size is related to athletic potential.

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The processes of growth and maturation are instrumental in the socialization of young athletes. Biological factors, such as physique, body size and maturity status, have been identified as predictors of performance and selection in a number of sports (Malina, Bouchard, & Bar-Or, 2004). The impact of biological growth and maturation on the psychological and social development of young athletes has, however, received little attention (Kontos & Malina, 2003). The processes of growth and maturation may influence young athletes' self-perceptions, motives, beliefs, and, ultimately, their behaviors. Moreover, coaches, parents, and administrators may react differently to children who vary in body size, physique, and/or maturity status. With this in mind, the purpose of this study was to investigate relations among body size, perceptions of coaching behaviors, and attitudes toward the coach and sport in adolescent female athletes in three sports.

How do coaches respond to the physical characteristics of female athletes? Body size acts as a selection factor for females in a number of sports (Beunen & Claessens, 2003). Sports that emphasize stature, strength or explosive power tend to favor girls who are taller and heavier. From the age of 10 years, female swimmers, rowers, volleyball and basketball players present statures that, on average, approximate or exceed the 50th percentiles of the reference population (Beunen & Claessens, 2003; Malina, 1994, 1998; Malina et al., 2004). On the other hand, several other sports and performance activities select girls who are short in stature and/or low in body mass. For example, female artistic gymnasts and figure skaters present profiles of short stature and low body mass with mean values typically well below reference medians; whereas ballet dancers and distance runners present low mass-for-stature (Malina, 1998; Malina et al., 2004).

Although evidence suggests that body size plays an important role in the inclusion and exclusion of female athletes, it is not clear if size, as a selection factor, operates directly as a predictor of performance and/or indirectly through the reactions of significant others (e.g. coaches, peers, parents, sport administrators). The Mediated Effects Model of Psychological Adaptation to Puberty (Petersen & Taylor, 1980) provides an appropriate theoretical framework in which to examine role of body size in the socialization of young athletes (Fig. 1). This model assumes that the psychological and behavioral effects of growth and maturation are mediated by the individual's "ideation about his or her biological changes and the subjective meaning or affective significance attributed to them" (p. 137). That is, the individual's perception and evaluation of their physical self are instrumental in determining how they adjust, socially and psychologically, to the changes associated with growth and maturation. Further, the evaluations, reactions, and impressions conveyed by significant others (e.g. peers, educators, parents) are also deemed to play an important role in helping youth adjust socially and psychologically to the physical changes associated with growth and maturation. Given the role that body size plays in the socialization and selection of young athletes, athletes may be particularly sensitive to the physical changes associated with growth and maturation.

The physical characteristics of female athletes may hold significant social stimulus value for coaches, particularly in sports where body size is associated with performance—aesthetic sports (gymnastics and figure skating), sports that emphasize leanness (distance running), or sports where greater size may

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