

What Do Children Most Enjoy about Summer Soccer Camp? Gender and Group Perceptions

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Abstract

One hundred children attending a summer soccer camp in NE Ohio provided written data on what they most enjoyed about the camp. Findings indicated that, overall, they ranked 'soccer games and skills' and 'camp related activities' as the two leading major categories. In terms of gender group analysis (females = 49; males = 51) the males gave more emphasis than did the females to the first ranked major category of 'soccer games and skills'. Further, the boys' group ranked the major category 'social experiences' in third place and 'learning focus' in fourth. In contrast, the girls group placed 'social experiences' and 'learning focus' in the reverse rank order. Specific subcategory analysis revealed that the female group gave greater response emphasis to 'playing world cup' games than the males who, in turn, focused more on 'performing specific skills' than did the females. The boys also gave more emphasis to the subcategories of 'watching videos' and 'meeting the coaches' than the girls. The female group gave more response to 'interacting with peers' and 'taking super skill tests' than did their male counterparts. Study findings raised issues, questions and areas for future research; particularly, in terms of gender stereotypes, bias and learning as factors related to soccer camp grouping, activity selection, coach impact and instructional media.

Introduction

According to the Soccer Industry Council of America the number of registered United States (U.S.) youth soccer players has tripled since 1980

to 3.4 million (Business Wire, 1998). One particular area within soccer that has really developed is that of female participation. For example, Acosta and Carpenter (2000) found that soccer exhibited the largest growth of any women's sport at the collegiate level. Further, female youth soccer fever was also perceived to be spreading during the approach to the women's world cup, an event that was hosted by the U.S. in 1999 (Business Wire, 1998).

To cater to this rise in youth soccer popularity, many summer soccer camps accommodate both boys and girls at the same campsite. Such camps often utilize mixed gender coaching groups that are usually formed with children of a similar age. This type of camp organization, however, appears to support an implicit assumption that the general coaching activities and approaches chosen will work equally effectively with both males and females. Clearly, this assumption is difficult to assess when there is no available research describing and analyzing the influence of soccer camp environments on male and female participants' perceptions and/or performance.

While there is some literature indicating sport and physical activity helps improve girls' well-being (Pipher, 1994) and self esteem (Jaffee & Manzer, 1992) the soccer world, in general, knows little about its youth influence, particularly on females. An Australian study by Traill (1993) did find that 13-18 year-old-girls choose to play the "male sport" of soccer because of fun, friendship, feeling good and the involvement of good coaches. Yet, Twarek and George (1994) found that elementary age boys tended to choose games

like soccer because of the more inherent aggressive, competitive and large group nature of the sport.

In fact, Greendorfer (1993) has indicated that sport socialization and involvement may be inherently more complex for females than for males. For example, she has suggested that males receive positive and consistent support from groups such as family, peers, teachers and coaches regarding sport involvement. In contrast, females may often make their sport involvement decisions based on more general, diffuse and subtle influences provided by such support givers.

Further, Greendorfer (1993) points out that girls' game experiences (unlike boys) fail to provide them with the opportunities to achieve goals, develop strategies and cooperate in groups while competing with other teams. Consequently, she concludes that whether they are athletes or not, girls are subjected to gender role stereotypes and differential treatment that adversely influences their sports participation and achievement. Hence, Greendorfer calls for the influence of sport on females to be studied in diverse activity environments so as to identify and raise awareness about contextual impact on gender group outcomes.

Therefore, the present pilot research focused on a soccer camp environment and was undertaken during the summer of 2001. Specifically, data was gathered to begin a knowledge-base derived from the perceptions of soccer camp participants. In particular, information was generated that helped to describe both gender group perceptions concerning soccer camp enjoyment and the potential impact of camp organization and coaching on these perceptions.

Methods

Site

The summer soccer camp selected for this research was organized by a for profit business that had been offering soccer camps for 23 years in the American Midwest. The specific campsite

used for the present research ran for two consecutive weeks during August 2001 and was 'housed' at a private school facility located in a rural setting in Northeast Ohio.

Children could sign to attend one or both camp weeks. Seven year olds and older were encouraged to spend the whole day (9am-3pm) at the camp. This type of camp was actually referred to as 'general day' summer soccer camp because there was no specific attempt to attract intact soccer teams or to use overnight residency as a promotional camp focus. Children of varied soccer ability and experience from recreational to premier level signed up individually or in small groups for these two weekday camps.

The school facility utilized included three outdoor fields, a large gymnasium for indoor practice and a 25 meter indoor swimming pool for recreational swims. Also available was a video area for showing instructional tapes and a large cafeteria area where the participants ate lunch.

The general day camp curriculum focused on a specific skill(s) each day. Certified soccer coaches worked with mixed gender groups that ranged from 4 to 16 players in size. During the morning groups focused on a basic skill(s) and the children were also given the opportunity to practice and test themselves against the soccer Super Skills Awards. These awards were originally designed and refined in England by The Football (soccer is called football in England) Association (1982). The awards represent a series of seven basic skill assessments that become progressively more difficult as a player moves up the five award levels. The camp morning activities were concluded via the use of very small-sided games within groups (i.e., 1 vs. 1, 2 vs. 2).

After lunch (indoors) the children were given a recreational swim and then observed commercial instructional soccer videos (e.g., Conrad Television Associates Ltd., 1990) with supporting feedback provided by the coaches. The groups then returned to the fields to work on a basic tactical idea related to the morning's skill(s) (e.g., width in attack related to dribbling). The camp

day finished with larger-sided games (i.e., 5 vs. 5, 6 vs. 6) with groups close in age being combined from Wednesday onwards to play 'world cup' tournaments.

Subjects

One hundred day camp children 7-12 years of age provided data for this investigation through completion of a brief written questionnaire.

The mean age for the 49 females was 9.61 years. The mean for the 51 males was 8.92 years.

Instrument

Each subject completed a written questionnaire (Table 1) that involved answering three questions. The process took subjects between 10-15 minutes to complete although there was no time limit imposed. Two questions requested specific information on subject gender and age. The third question was more open-ended and gathered data on subjects' perceptions regarding three things that they had most enjoyed about attending the soccer camp.

As this is a minimally researched area an open-ended question was selected as the method for gathering the majority of the data. This approach was utilized so that subjects' own perceptions could be used to begin building an initial database on this topic. Further, subjects' own perceptions were able to be classified and categorized rather than imposing a priori limitations on the data through the use of pre-established categories (Newlove & Hall, 1976).

Data Collection

Data were gathered over two consecutive weeks. All general day children at these camps on the final morning of each week completed the written questionnaire while seated in a large room. Children who attended both weeks of camp were not required to complete a second questionnaire.

The researcher distributed all the questionnaires to the children on both occasions. The questionnaire was explained to the children and

any questions that they had were answered before they wrote their answers. Further, it was indicated both on the questionnaire and by the researcher that there were no right or wrong answers to the question asking for subject perceptions. Consequently, answers should be a subject's own and there was, therefore, no need to talk to those sat close by. The researcher reemphasized this point as the subjects wrote their answers.

Data Analyses

Analysis of the data was guided by the following two research questions:

1. What do children identify as those aspects that they most enjoy on a general day summer soccer camp?
2. Do children differ in gender group response emphasis in terms of those identified aspects that they most enjoy on a general day summer soccer camp?

Children's background data was collected in predetermined categories, (i.e., gender and age) to allow a basic respondent group description utilizing descriptive statistics (i.e., number and percentages). The data generated by the open-ended question required more subjective analytic reflection and involved a three stage process. First, the data was read and re-read. Multiple readings of the respondents' perceptions allowed the researcher to identify specific words, phrases and themes that emerged from the data. This inductive analysis (Patton, 1980) allowed these emergent themes to be classified into specific subcategories.

Several respondents' answers provided more than three examples of aspects they had enjoyed at the soccer camp. Consequently, all the data statements were included in the analysis. This accounts for the overall frequency totals being slightly higher than would have been expected from this investigation's 100 participants.

A second stage analysis of these initial subcategory classifications then allowed the researcher to group them within more general major categories.

Table 1

Soccer Camp Survey

Soccer players we would like you to tell us about this soccer camp. Please answer the following questions.

A) *Please circle if you are a: Boy or a Girl

B) *Please write down your age: _____

C) *Please write down three things that you enjoyed about being at soccer camp this week. Remember there are no right or wrong answers only your ideas. Do not talk about or copy other players' ideas as you write.

1.

2.

3.

Thank you for completing this form.

These major category classifications allowed for more embracing overall descriptions of the areas that seemed to hold important meaning for these study children. Findings for both these major and subcategories are reported utilizing descriptive statistics involving rank, frequency and percentage.

Final third stage analysis allowed the emergent major and subcategory findings to be further analyzed by gender group. Data was placed into two groups; male and female. The male gender group contained 51 boys, the female gender group comprised 49 girls. Both group's individual data statements were again classified into the established sub and major categories. Findings for both the gender groups are presented by major and subcategory via descriptive statistics involving rank, frequency and percentage.

Data Classification Reliability

To check the reliability of the two types of data classification produced two procedures were used. Background (i.e., age and gender) data reliability saw a simple count recount intra rater procedure utilized to check the children's responses.

To check the reliability of the emergent major categories which described the general aspects of the soccer camp that the children had most enjoyed, an inter-rater reliability check was used. This process involved another person outside the study placing 20 randomly selected study data statements into what they perceived to be the appropriate areas, within the relevant major category classifications. These major categories were all verbally (and in writing) defined to the external study rater prior to the classification.

Inter-rater results between the external rater classification and the researcher's original data statement assignments were compared using inter-observer exact agreement calculations. Calculations indicated an 85% consensus suggesting a satisfactory degree of reliability in terms of the researcher's interpretation of the emergent data classification.

Findings

The following study findings are presented in relation to the two research questions that guided this particular study.

Children's Perceptions of the most Enjoyable Aspects of Soccer Camp

Major Category

In terms of what the children perceived to be the most enjoyable aspects of their general day soccer camp Table 2 indicates that there were five major categories that emerged from the data. Almost half (46.58%) the examples provided were grouped under the description of 'soccer games and skills'. The second ranked major category (23.78%) contained other 'camp related activities'.

These first two major categories together accounted for 7 out of every 10 data examples (70.36%) that the children provided. These major categories were followed in rank order (3-5) by 'social experiences' (13.68%), 'learning focus' (13.36%) and 'personal camp benefits' (2.61%).

Subcategory

Table 2 also provides a more specific description by subcategory as to what children had identified as the most enjoyable aspects of the two soccer camps. As indicated, there are 16 subcategories that constitute the five major categories.

In terms of the first ranked major category (i.e., soccer games and skills) the subcategories of 'playing soccer related games' (39.86%) and 'playing world cup' (32.87%) accounted for close to three quarters of the children's responses within this major area (72.73%). Just over a quarter of the examples (27.27%) focused on 'performing specific skills'. The subcategory of 'swimming' (79.45%) dominated the second major category of 'camp related activities'.

The leading subcategories in the three remaining major categories (i.e., 3 -5) were 'meeting the

coaches' (73.81% in social experiences), 'learning soccer skills' (70.73% in learning focus) and 'having fun' (87.50% in personal camp benefits).

Gender Group Perceptions of the Most Enjoyable Aspects of Soccer Camp

Major Category

Table 3 indicates what the children perceived to be the most enjoyable aspects of their general day soccer camp by gender group major category response. Both males and females respectively identified 'soccer games and skills' (49.67% & 43.42%) and 'camp related activities' (23.88% & 23.68%) as their first and second ranked major categories.

In terms of the remaining major categories the male group response placed 'social experiences' (14.83%), 'learning focus' (8.39%) and 'personal camp benefits' (3.22%) in rank order 3-5. The female group response saw 'learning focus' (18.42%) in third rank followed by 'social experiences' (12.50%) and 'personal camp benefits' (1.97%).

Subcategory

Table 3 also presents the gender group subcategory percentages within the five ranked major categories. Within the first ranked major category (i.e., soccer games and skills) both the boys and girls group response respectively placed 'playing soccer related games' in the first subcategory position (40.26% & 39.40%). The females placed (37.88%) 'playing world cup' in second rank and 'performing specific skills' (22.72%) as the third subcategory. Male group response ranked 'performing specific skills' (31.17%) as the second subcategory and 'playing world cup' (28.57%) in third place.

Within the second ranked major category (i.e., camp related activities) 'swimming' was the leading subcategory for both boys (75.67%) and girls (83.33%). The male group identified 'watching videos' (21.62%) as their second

placed subcategory. The female response ranked both 'eating lunch' and 'water breaks' in joint second position (5.56%).

In terms of the three remaining major categories 'meeting the coaches' was for both boys and girls groups respectively (82.61% & 63.16%) the number one subcategory within the major category 'social experiences'. Within the major category 'learning focus' the first ranked subcategory for both males and females respectively was 'learning soccer skills' (84.62% & 64.29%). 'Having fun' was the leading subcategory for both males (80.00%) and females (100.00%) within the final major category (i.e., personal camp benefits).

Discussion

Clearly (as might have been anticipated), children want to play soccer at camp. This is shown by their first ranked major category (Table 2-soccer games and skills). Yet, it is not just playing team-based soccer (i.e., one team vs. another on a full or reduced sized field) that the children highlighted. They also indicated enjoying performing a variety of different types of soccer games ('soccer related games') and individual skills ('specific skills'), as well as playing in the 'world cup' tournaments.

Likewise, 'soccer games and skills' remained the leading major category when the data were also analyzed by gender (Table 3). Subcategory analysis (Table 3) indicated that both male and female groups respectively were very similar in terms of within group response towards the first ranked category, 'playing soccer related games' (i.e., 40.26% & 39.40%). However, the girls gave more group response to 'playing world cup' than did the boys (37.88% v 28.57%). In contrast, it was the males who gave more group response toward the subcategory 'performing specific skills' than did the females (i.e., 31.17% vs. 22.72%).

These subcategory gender group response differences within the first ranked major category (i.e., soccer games and skills) are interesting from

Table 2

Children's Perceptions of the most Enjoyable Aspects of a General Day			
Soccer Camp by Major and Subcategory			
Rank/Major Category		Frequency	Percentage
Rank/Subcategory			
1. Soccer Games & Skills		143	46.58
1	Playing soccer related games	57	39.86
2	Playing world cup	47	32.87
3	Performing specific skills	39	27.27
2. Camp Related Activities		73	23.78
1	Swimming	58	79.45
2	Watching videos	9	12.33
3	Eating lunch	3	4.12
4	Water breaks	2	2.74
5	Camp certificates	1	1.36
3. Social Experiences		42	13.68
1	Meeting the coaches	31	73.81
2	Interacting with peers	11	26.19
4. Learning Focus		41	13.36
1	Learning soccer skills	29	70.73
2	Taking super skill tests	9	21.95
3	Increasing soccer knowledge	2	4.88
4	Learning soccer rules	1	2.44
5. Personal Camp Benefits		8	2.61
1	Having fun	7	87.50
2	Feeling successful	1	12.50

Table 3

**Gender Group Perceptions of the most Enjoyable Aspects of a General
Day Soccer Camp by Major and Subcategory**

Major Category Subcategory	Frequency & %	
	Male	Female
Soccer Games & Skills	77 (49.67)	66 (43.42)
Playing soccer related games	31 (40.26)	26 (39.40)
Playing world cup	22 (28.57)	25 (37.88)
Performing specific skills	24 (31.17)	15 (22.72)
Camp Related Activities	37 (23.88)	36 (23.68)
Swimming	28 (75.67)	30 (83.33)
Watching videos	8 (21.62)	1 (02.78)
Eating lunch	1 (02.70)	2 (05.56)
Water breaks	0 (00.00)	2 (05.56)
Camp certificates	0 (00.00)	1 (02.78)
Social Experiences	23 (14.83)	19 (12.50)
Meeting the coaches	19 (82.61)	12 (63.16)
Interacting with peers	4 (17.39)	7 (36.84)
Learning Focus	13 (08.39)	28 (18.42)
Learning soccer skills	11 (84.62)	18 (64.29)
Taking super skill tests	1 (07.69)	8 (28.57)
Increasing soccer knowledge	0 (00.00)	2 (07.14)
Learning soccer rules	1 (07.69)	0 (00.00)
Personal Camp Benefits	5 (03.22)	3 (01.97)
Having fun	4 (80.00%)	3 (100.0%)
Feeling successful	1 (20.00%)	0 (00.00%)

the perspective of previous research results. For example, Twarek and George (1994) found that 8-11 year old females preferred more passive, non-competitive activities, while the same age range boys favored more aggressive, competitive activity endeavors. Further, Vaughter, Sadh and Vozzola (1994) indicated that boys tended to play more often in group or team activities; girls tended to play most often individually or in dyads.

Yet, based on the present study findings it was the females rather than the males, who gave more within group response toward playing small-sided competitive games (i.e., 'playing world cup'— 4 vs. 4 to 6 vs. 6). In contrast, it was the males more than the females who emphasized 'performing specific skills;' practice situations that often involved working individually or in pairs. Therefore, these findings suggest a potential move by the present gender groups counter to the more stereotypically images outlined by Twarek and George (1994) and Vaughter et. al (1994).

This contrast between past and present research results may, in fact, relate to both the organization and expectations demonstrated at the present campsite. As indicated, boys and girls in the present research participated in mixed gender coaching groups. They were expected to participate together undertaking the same within group skill and tactical practice progressions.

According to the present researcher's camp observations there were no overt gender biases demonstrated in terms of generally modifying coaching approaches to 'accommodate' one gender over another, within the groups. Consequently, males and females experienced the same within group content and pedagogical approach.

Therefore, such a camp coaching approach meant that both genders had similar within group experiences from which to identify those aspects of camp that they had most enjoyed. In particular, female choices had not been restricted (due to gender bias) in terms of the practical experiences presented to them by their coaches.

Thus, present results suggest that when males and females at soccer camp are allowed to

participate together with the same expectations for within group performance, they can in fact, make similar enjoyment choices (i.e., types of skill/ game organization identified). Further, they can also demonstrate choices that have in previous research (e.g., Twarek & George, 1994; Vaughter et al., 1994) been more closely associated with the opposite gender's traditional stereotypic image.

With regard to the second leading major category, 'camp related activities' (Table 3) there was more gender group difference in terms of the second subcategory of 'watching videos.' The boys gave this greater group response than did the girls (i.e., 21.62% v 2.78%). Research (Pace & Lowery, 2001; Shmurak & Ratcliff, 1993) has pointed to the use of gender stereotypes and images in children's instructional settings; particularly, classrooms. At the present research campsite, the commercial videos used were all male dominated in terms of the players highlighted.

Interestingly, the present researcher noted one camp female who during a video session asked, why, if the camp was almost half female in terms of participants there were no videos used of girls playing soccer. This participant question might suggest why the female group gave less response emphasis to the video usage than did the male group.

Clearly, gender bias is a factor that needs more focus in terms of soccer camp research to identify potential impact on the enjoyment of participants. Such investigation is important because some research (e.g., Voorhees, 1994) has indicated that when educators are made aware of gender bias in their practices, they do become more conscious of their own teacher-child (gender) interactions.

Consequently, there needs to be more specific research undertaken into the influence of camp instructional media images on the enjoyment perceptions of gender groups. In particular, camp organizers need clarification as to how males and females identify with and benefit from watching videotape images; a form of media that is

regularly used at soccer camps as an aid to modeling and imparting information.

In terms of children's perceived enjoyable 'social experiences' the present males and females respectively (14.83% & 12.50% - Table 3) showed similar group response toward this major category. However, the boys indicated greater within group emphasis on 'meeting the coaches' than did the girls (82.61% v 63.16%). Again, gender bias may have had an influence on these descriptive findings. For example, the majority of the coaches at the research campsite during the two weeks were male. Therefore, it may have been the boys more so than the girls who felt a closer connection to the coaches.

Previous research (Patriksson & Eriksson, 1990) has highlighted the important role that coaches play in children's sport. However, Seefeldt and Ewing (1997) have bemoaned the lack of female coaches who can serve as role models/mentors for young girls in youth sport. Further, they point to the potential that this situation may have in terms of actually discouraging girls' participation in organized sports. Clearly, therefore, there needs to be more specific research into the influence that coach gender has on children's enjoyment at soccer camp.

The present camp clearly had a male emphasis in terms of both the gender of the majority of the coaches and the video image usage. Findings indicate that the girls gave less emphasis to these two aspects of camp organization and instruction than did the boys. What is not known is whether or not the girls actually experienced negative impact on their camp enjoyment perceptions due to these two male dominated areas. This is important to establish because negative impact, may, in fact, hold implication for females longer-term commitment to the sport of soccer.

'Learning focus' was given greater group major category response emphasis by the females (18.42%) who ranked it third than by the males (8.39%) who ranked the category fourth (Table 3). Further, the girls also indicated a greater sub-category group emphasis than did the boys

(28.57% vs. 7.69%—Table 3) on their own personal learning via 'taking super skill tests'. Interestingly, the boys focus on learning was almost entirely on 'learning soccer skills'. They did not demonstrate the girls interest in the tests as a method of assessing personal learning improvement over the duration of the camp week.

Clearly, further research needs to be conducted into why the girls should have placed a greater emphasis on learning (and testing) as an enjoyable factor at camp than did the boys. This is important because soccer camps in their promotional literature often tout children's soccer learning as a benefit of the camp experience.

Interestingly, past research (Jaffe & Manzer, 1992, Pipher, 1994) has identified the positive influence of sport on girls' self-esteem and confidence. Consequently, it may in fact, be the positive impact on female well-being that leads the present study girls to identify this sense of personal learning as one aspect of their camp enjoyment. Again, there is a need for further research into this area of children's learning at soccer camp. In particular, as it may hold implication for longer-term commitment to this sport, especially, by females (as already suggested in terms of the potential impact of video images and coach gender at camp).

Conclusion

The purpose of this descriptive pilot study utilizing a qualitative approach was to initiate research into children's perceptions of the most enjoyable aspects of a general day summer soccer camp. In particular, this investigation also attempted to describe gender group differences in response emphasis related to potential camp organizational and coaching factors. While there are no claims for generalization of the present findings to other soccer settings several interesting issues and questions did emerge from this data analysis; an important purpose for exploratory research.

However, to help build on the present findings future research might utilize more focused

methods and analytical procedures that would provide greater insights into these issues and questions. For example, based on the present results, soccer camps need to understand more about the impact of both coach gender and media image usage in relation to the enjoyment perceptions of male and female camp participants.

Further, replication of the present investigation's focus would help in assessing whether or not the findings obtained can be generalized. In addition, such replication would also be important to those who may feel that the present study inter-rater level of consensus (i.e., 85%) concerning category classification reliability might have been higher.

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