

Understanding the “drop out phenomena” in sport

A Research Challenge – Henny Oldenhove

Background

There is a general assumption by the sports industry that there is a ‘drop out phenomena’ that occurs in sports participation of young people.

The commonly held beliefs are that the ‘drop out phenomena’:

- Peaks at about age 15,16 years.
- Is greater for girls than for boys.
- Occurs in the transition between primary and secondary school, and at the end of secondary school education.

There are snapshots from the research that help the industry to understand and give insights to this phenomenon, however more comprehensive research is required to test these commonly held assumptions and to measure the extent to which they are true.

The *Children’s Participation in Culture and Leisure Activities* study conducted by the ABS in April 2000 showed that 59.4% of children aged 5-14 years were involved in organised sport outside of school hours. The ACT participation rate is higher than the national rate although the participation rate of girls is still lower than that of boys.

Organised sport (outside school hours): ABS April 2000

	Males	Females	Overall
ACT	70.2%*	54.6%**	62.5%
Australia	66.1%	52.3%	59.4%

* This is the highest figure of participation by males in Australia

**Although ACT females are still above the Australian average, 45% of girls are not participating in organised sport outside school.

Research

A literature review of ‘youth drop out’ research indicates that several studies have been conducted in Australia and internationally. A review of this literature shows that the evidence is not clear as to the extent and nature of this phenomenon.

Some of the research includes:

- Studies conducted on gender specific groups, usually girls that show some evidence of drop out but do not enable any gender comparison to see whether the rate of drop out is a factor of gender, age or other factors.
- Studies that are based on statistical data that show a decline in participation numbers in organised sport but do not consider a shift of participation to other activities such as provided by non-traditional organisations including recreation and commercial centres.
- Sport specific studies that measure shifts of participation in that sport but do not consider that the participant may have ‘transferred’ to another sport or activity.

- Some time series studies that have tracked participation over periods of two years, which may be insufficient, and one conducted over a 7 year period for which the median age was 21.
- Studies that consider the factors affecting drop out such as parental influence, experiences, competing priorities etc. but do not quantify the extent of drop out over various ages.

One study defined three types of drop out:

- **The sampler drop out.** A person who moves around trying a number of sports.
- **The participant drop out.** A person who for what ever reason actually stops their participation in sport.
- **The transfer drop out.** A person who simply transfers to another sport.

Issues

There are two requirements of research.

1. Organisational Perspective

From an organisational perspective it may be important to measure the shifts in participants in individual sports and activities to see the participation trends in that sport. For example, if there is a high participation rate up to age 12 and then there is a steady decline in subsequent age groups then it could be argued that that sport is experiencing a 'drop out'.

It may also be useful to measure participation rates and trends within the boundaries of traditional sport, such as those defined by the ASC, to show the extent of shifts between sports. This would provide a better understanding of any 'displacement' trends. It may be that one sport's loss is another sport's gain and that participation rates overall remain the same.

On an aggregate basis it may be necessary to measure participation rates from traditional organised sport to other forms of sport participation such as offered by commercial providers or community recreation organisations that conduct sport programs. This would help to measure the drop out in terms of numbers ceasing sport participation against those 'transferring' their participation and help to measure shifts within the industry as a whole.

2. Participant perspective

If we are concerned about the active lifestyles of young people, then research that maps participant trends is required. This may involve participation in sport and physical activity at an organised or unorganised level and at a level of activity that would give a degree of certainty about the health benefits derived from their activity patterns.

Taking this approach to measure any 'drop out phenomenon' would require research centred on the individual rather than the statistical data provided by individual organisations. To measure participation for young people through the years of primary, secondary and post school life would most likely require a time series research approach.

Both research approaches are valid and would help to inform the industry about the participation trends of young people and the efficacy of their programs and services.

Defining the research challenge

There are a number of hypothesis and questions that need to be tested through research.

These include:

- Many young people play a number of sports at an early age (8-12 years). This is often to try a number of options and to experience the various summer and winter sports on offer. A number of these young people, having found a sport that interests them or pursuing a talent pathway in a given sport, may well reduce the number of sports in which they participate as they enter their teen years. This would lead several sports to measure a 'drop out' which would be accurate in a statistical measure of participation. It may well be however, that the individual is no less active and may in fact be more active but in one or two chosen sports.
- Many young people commence their active participation in organised and structured sport. As they get older a number of young people shift their participation to other forms of activity such as organised and non organised recreation pursuits, gym membership and other programs in commercial and community based organisations. These organisations often sit outside the statistical data collection network.
- Australia's high percentage of school students in the workforce in casual occupations in retail, hospitality and food industries along with increased school and study demands reduce the time available for sport and recreation and may contribute to the drop out rate. The question is whether there is a resurgence of participation in the early to mid 20's when full time work or study actually provides more time or more structured time for sport and recreation. The other question is whether this represents a time when many change their participation to different activities and between organised or unorganised options.
- Is the practice of allowing girls and boys to play a number of sports together in the younger years (all football codes, cricket, baseball) then requiring them to play in separate sex competitions, where usually after the age of 12 there is not the critical mass for girls in particular to create viable competitions. Does this contribute to a greater female drop out rate?
- Do young people that play sport in community clubs stay in sport longer as they do not have to make the transition from school to club at critical stages where their school sport opportunities cease at the end of primary and high school? Is the drop out rate of those that play sport at school only any greater than that of those that play at clubs from a young age?

Conclusion

In order to fully understand the participation trends of young people and where 'drop out' might occur, a research methodology needs to be designed that addresses the hypothesis and questions raised above. This research will need to track a cohort of individuals over time to better understand the shifts and causes of participation across and in between organised and unorganised activities. Reliance on statistical measures alone do not provide an accurate picture of 'drop out'.

It is likely that once a research methodology is developed that the costs of such a research project would be significant.