

The Last Game and The Years That Follow: A Case Study on the Experiences of Participants in a High School Football Program

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Introduction

High school sports are recognized for their numerous positive impacts, as evidenced by extensive research. Despite this, the unique experiences of individuals involved in specific sports, such as football, remain underexplored. This study aimed to address this gap by examining the perspectives of coaches and former student-athletes who participated in one Saskatchewan high school football program that was intentionally structured to foster character development.

Keywords: High school sports; Football program; Character development; Coaches; Former student-athletes; Emotional fluctuations; Life skills development; Coaching.

Methods

This study employed an intrinsic case study design to explore the perspectives of former participants in

the described high school football program. Using snowball sampling, two coaches (minimum 3 years of experience) and four former student-athletes (graduated between 1 - 6 years prior) were recruited. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and document analysis. All interviews were transcribed, and documents were reviewed, with key findings recorded in a research journal. Finally, reflexive thematic analysis was employed to identify and interpret themes within the data.

Results

Analysis of documents, as well as insights from coaches and former student-athletes, revealed three key themes. The first theme explores how high school football serves as a microcosm of life's emotional fluctuations, exposing athletes' raw character during extreme highs and lows. It examines how the prevailing win-focused framework contributes to these emotional fluctuations, which can serve as opportunities for character development, while also contrasting this framework with the ideals promoted by coaches and high school football regulatory

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bodies. The second theme explores the design of the program and the coaches' intent behind its structure, which forms the foundation of the program. Specifically, it investigates the elements coaches have incorporated into the framework, how they implement their approach, and the underlying motivations behind each structural decision. The third theme addresses the experiences this program's design and intent facilitated for both coaches and former student-athletes. Coaches, having observed multiple program iterations, identified both beneficial (e.g., strong relationships, team camaraderie, and core values) and problematic elements (e.g., work-life balance, tough playtime decisions, and limited reach with some student-athletes). Former student-athletes reflected on how the program shaped them, highlighting both positive (e.g., development of life skills, community and relationships, and the sport itself) and negative influences (e.g., coaching challenges and discipline dynamics; balancing demands and expectations; and physical and social risks).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the participants' insights offer a deeper understanding of their experiences in this unique football program. These perspectives provide valuable information to high school coaches seeking to develop student athletes' abilities and characteristics beyond the playing field.