

## Original Research

## The Value of Sport Sampling as an Influence and Intervention in a Sport-Based Youth Development Program

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### ABSTRACT

Through engagement with sport and physical activity, sport-based youth development (SBYD) programs aim to support the development of youth toward a positive sense of self, enrich their human and social capital, and enhance their personal skills, development assets, and competencies. The purpose of this study is to explore the role, programmatic strategy, and impact of sport sampling opportunities offered in a SBYD program. To this end, we interviewed 19 racially and economically marginalized youth, ages 10-17 years old, participating in an after-school SBYD program on the campus of a large university in the Southeast United States. Data revealed four themes (sampling sport, emotional management, development outcomes, and sports mentoring) comprised of 12 sub-themes. We discuss each against the backdrop of the racially and economically marginalized community in which participants live. Implications of our study can be used to help advance sport-sampling as a development intervention in campus-community partnerships, as well as expand our conceptual understanding of sport sampling.

### The Value of Sport Sampling as an Influence and Intervention in a Sport-Based Youth Development Program

Sport is a valued environment offering unique challenges and opportunities in which physical, cognitive, and emotional skills can be learned and practiced, as well as personal development outcomes realized (Turnnidge et al., 2014). Sport has also been recognized as a platform from which societal issues, particularly those disparately impacting disadvantaged groups, can be addressed in a socially just manner (Camiré et al., 2021) to provide opportunities for equity, social inclusion, and community development (Cohen et al., 2014; Skinner et al., 2008). Understanding and utilizing sport as an instrument to facilitate social cohesion, a sense of connection, and local capacity development contributes to physical and socially healthy communities (Shilbury et al., 2008). Likewise, empirical research has demonstrated, albeit to varying degrees, that sport has the potential as both a context and intervention to positively influence youth development (Bruner et al., 2021). Thus, sport-based youth development (SBYD) programs utilize the unique appeal and effectiveness of sport and physical activity to design curriculum that best supports youth in their advancement of life skills, human and social capital, emotional intelligence, as well as positive engagement with their community, and enhanced sense of self (Coakley, 2011; Perkins & Noam, 2007; Petitpas et al., 2017).

However, to capitalize on the utility of sport toward these ends, programming must be deliberate in its efforts (see Jones et al., 2017). The potential positive gains of SBYD programming will be largely dependent upon the delivery of curriculum and interventions, as well as how they are received or experienced by participants (Bruner et al., 2021). Within this design process, SBYD administrators (e.g., coaches, parents, volunteers, etc.) must be cognizant of their role in creating and maintaining a supportive environment that provides sport-based interventions and physical activities that reinforce and encourage confidence and a positive sense of self (Holt & Neely, 2011; Hornor, 2017; Jones et al., 2017). Sport mentorship, the use of sport and physical activity to develop relationships that contribute to youths' attainment and advancement of personal and interpersonal life skills, has been found to "be a unique context and tool for developing self-management and growth skills" (Choi et al., 2015, p. 270). Along with the integration of nontraditional and innovative youth development models, sport-based interventions have resulted in making physical activity more "accessible and appealing for underprivileged populations" (Cohen & Ballouli, 2018, p. 367).

For instance, when interviewing youth who have experienced trauma and are coming from under-resourced communities, Whitley et al. (2018) found sport can serve as an optimal context and intervention toward the development and transference of life skills. Similarly, Wegner et al., (2022) found the teamwork often inherent in competition and the sporting space can facilitate positive interactions and relationships between participants, peers, coaches, and mentors that further integrate necessary community and family elements into the program. Sport has also been found to be a catalyst for change agents and cause champions, who from their own experiences with trauma or marginalization, desire to "give back" through social entrepreneurship and sport-for and youth development initiatives (Cohen & Welty Peachey, 2015). Thus, it is important that SBYD programs in sociocultural and economically marginalized communities offer opportunities for positive relationship building among youth and local peers, adults, mentors, and community leaders; social engagement with whom will lead to the development of life skills through individual, familial, sociocultural, and community strengths and resources (Arinze & McGarry, 2021; Clauss-Ehlers, 2008; Johns et al., 2014; Seccombe, 2002; Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012). In this study we provide insight into how one SBYD program utilized the sampling of sports toward this end. As a result, we additionally expand upon the conceptual understanding of sport sampling.

## Sport Sampling and SBYD

The practice of sport sampling is typically understood as participating in more than one sport per year, or different iterations of the same sport, to participating in multiple sports or activities to enhance physical and motor development rather than the pursuit elite skill development in one sport (Côté et al., 2020; Jones & Chang, 2021). Sport sampling has been linked to positive sport outcomes, such as fundamental motor skill competency, lower frequency of athletic injuries, decreased rate of burnout, and psychosocial outcomes, such as improved social skills, leadership skills, and positive identity development (DiStefano et al., 2018; Fransen et al., 2012). Moreover, engagement with varied sports (i.e., sampling) affords participants prospects to develop diverse skill sets across a variety of affective, cognitive, physical, and even psychosocial environments (Côté et al., 2009). Although recent scholarship has suggested the wide-ranging benefits and challenges of sport sampling, little has occurred as to whether, and if so how, these benefits are being afforded to and experienced by youth from under-resourced communities (Whitley et al., 2018). The extent to which sport sampling is engendered and fostered within the sporting realities (e.g., through SBYDs and similar programs) of racially marginalized youth communities requires additional examination. Still, youth development programs that utilize sport to emphasize and reinforce the attainment and enhancement of assets and resources are appropriate, given the proclivity of sport and physical activity to provide various learning opportunities (Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012).

As it concerns SBYD and the likes of after-school programs, Côté et al. (2009) argued the merits of encouraging youth to engage in a variety of sports and physical activities throughout the course of their development. For those youth "who are afforded the chance to participate in multiple activities [they] will be less likely to drop out and will also gain the psychosocial benefits associated with [sport] sampling" (Côté et al., 2009, p. 10). In this understanding, the sampling (i.e., engagement) of various sports aid youth in the attainment and enhancement of skills and assets that are practiced and applied across a variety of affective, cognitive, physical, and even psychosocial environments. For instance, "different sports and physical activities may facilitate the development of different components of neuromuscular control, including endurance, stability, movement quality, power, agility, strength, flexibility, and speed, to varying degrees,"

whereby the underdevelopment of any of these components may lead to increased “risk of injury and compromise future physical activity participation” (DiStefano et al., 2018, p. 161). It is this understanding of sport sampling, as a practice to reduce physical injury, lower burnout symptoms, extend engagement with sport and physical activity, and increase performance satisfaction among youth athletes that seems to be most proliferated (Carder et al., 2020; Giusti, 2020).

In noting that a developmental outcome of sampling was connecting youth to more diverse peer groups, Côté et al. (2009) argued that “peer acceptance becomes an important aspect of a positive self-concept,” whereby sampling benefits youth “who do not make friends in one [sport] program by providing them a chance to be accepted in another” (p. 10). For instance, coed and nontraditional sports such as quidditch have been found to reduce gender stereotypes, increase inclusivity, and enhance feelings of self-confidence pride among marginalized groups (i.e., women) who might otherwise be excluded (Cohen et al., 2014). However, due to structural factors and socialization effects, certain youth may be restricted from the benefits of experiencing different sports and not afforded acceptance within sporting spaces. If youth from racially and socioeconomically marginalized communities are barred from diverse sporting experiences and/or siloed into sports that reinforce their identity, there is an increased risk of furthering racial disparities in sport-based and physical activity outcomes, such as health and psychosocial developmental skills, needed to positively engage with sport across one’s life course (Sagas, 2013). Thus, the primary purpose of this study is to examine the role and outcomes of sport, and more specifically sport sampling, in the programmatic strategy of an afterschool SBYD program serving racially and economically marginalized youth. Knowing that outcomes of SBYD programs are contingent on a combination of social contextual factors and how curriculum activities (i.e., sport) are both utilized and experienced, our study was guided by wanting to learn more about 1) what constitutes sport sampling, 2) how sport sampling materializes, 3) facilitators of sport sampling, and 4) experiences with and outcomes of sport sampling within an SBYD program. Additionally, we propose sport sampling be conceptually extended to account for more inclusive types of engagement with and consumption of multiple and diverse sports.

## METHODS

Wanting to learn from individual experiences with sport sampling in an SBYD program and curate a holistic understanding of sport sampling, we conducted a basic qualitative study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

## The Program

The primary context in which the participants were asked to consider their sport and physical activity experiences, along with the subsequent impact of said experiences, was during their time in a SBYD afterschool program. The program was initiated in 2016. In addition to grants, donations, and fundraising, financial support is provided by a national sport foundation focused on developing tennis and educational outreach. In its infancy, the program met at a local recreation center, to which participants could walk, and were granted access to meeting rooms and the outdoor tennis courts. Not long after, the program’s Executive Director and the principal investigator forged a research services agreement that provided the program with daily access to a gymnasium on the campus of a large, public, predominantly White institution (PWI) in the southeast United States. Students and their families had to apply to be admitted into the program and commit to attendance for the full school year. An arrangement was made with the local school district to bus children from several middle and high schools to the campus gymnasium at the end of each school day. Once present and accounted for, the program participants were offered a curriculum of academic assistance, character and life skills development, and sport and physical activity opportunities. One day of programming was spent learning and playing tennis, one day involved unstructured free time in which participants selected their sport or physical activity (e.g., dancing, walking, basketball, football, soccer, etc.), and the remaining three days are intermittently scheduled around academics, personal development, and various planned or unstructured physical activity opportunities. The interventions relevant to this study consist of sport facility tours, attending sporting events, and engaging with the institution’s varsity (occasionally) and recreational sport programs. The intent is to take a holistic approach toward sport sampling and utilize it to promote and reinforce program participants’ developmental assets and protective factors in academic, physical, health, cognitive, and psycho-social domains (Bailey, 2016; Whitley et al., 2019).

## Data Collection

Previous research on sport sampling and youth development has been homogenous, primarily, and quantitatively focusing on the athleticism and sport performance(s) of boys and young men (Murata et al., 2021). Given this, we take a qualitative approach via interviews, and consider participant responses and experiences against the backdrop of the racially and economically marginalized community in which they live. Based on the exploratory nature of our work, we conducted semi-structured interviews to inquire how experiences with sport sampling impacted the program's youth, was integrated into the program's curriculum, and informed program development. A semi-structured interview guide was developed with 14 questions aimed at learning more about the participant experiences, reactions to, and potential impact of the various sport and physical activity opportunities provided through the program. To help ensure questions were programmatically and culturally relevant to the participants, as well as to minimize the potential influence of our race(s), cultural values, and gender identities on the questions and direction of the interview, input on the interview guide was collected from the executive director. Examples of questions and subsequent probes include: 1) When you have free time in the program, do you play sports or try to be active? If so, what do you do and why? and 2) Thinking about of your sport and physical activity experiences here, have you been more physically active since joining this program? How has the program influenced this change? Are you aware of any health benefits associated with sport and physical activity? Are you physically active in any other ways (e.g., walking, hiking, etc.) outside of the program?

At the time of data collection, the program had 51 youth participants, four full-time administrators, and approximately 20 volunteer coaches. Participants were recruited based on attendance and time in the program. Prior to the recruitment of participants and conducting interviews, university IRB approval was obtained. Accordingly, both parental consent and participant assent were gathered. Interviews were conducted and recorded via Zoom (2019) and Google Hangouts (2020). An administrator from the SBYD program also joined the interviews to ensure compliance. A total of 19 interviews were conducted by two members of the research team, averaging 29 minutes and 53 seconds. The longest interview lasted 49 minutes and 29 seconds while the shortest took 13 minutes and 19 seconds.

## Participants

At the time of data collection, 51 youth were active in the SBYD program and invited to participate in this study; 19 of whom agreed. The participants ranged in age from 12-17 years old, as well as time in the program, 0.5–4 years. Five (26.3%) of the participants identified as male and 14 (73.7%) as female. Fifteen (78.9%) of the participants racially identified as Black or African American, 3 (15.8%) selected Other (identifying as Puerto Rican or Multiracial), and 1 (5.3%) identified as Hispanic/Latinx. The household income of all 19 participants fell below the United Way ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) threshold, “the average income that a household needs to afford the basic necessities defined by the Household Survival Budget for each county in Florida” (United Way of Florida, 2020, p. 2).

## Data Analysis

Our analysis undertook a process akin to that of Braun and Clarke (2006; 2021): transcriptions of all 19 interviews underwent deep reads by each of the three researchers; after which two of the researchers independently coded the raw data (Saldaña, 2013). The principal investigator (PI) was the most involved and knowledgeable with the SBYD program and research project, and thus, collected the initial codes from the two researchers, reviewed their coding results, and developed themes. To improve coding reliability, the themes were returned to the coders, who then grouped words, sentences, and/or phrases in accordance with the nascent themes. In accordance with a codebook analysis, new themes were developed and suggested by the coders when thought appropriate (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The research team reconvened and after several rounds of reviews and discussion of the data, confirmed the data's themes and sub-themes through a negotiated agreement process, in which codes were compared and disagreements discussed to minimize discrepancies and strengthen intercoder agreement (Campbell et al., 2013; Thomas, 2006). As a result, the number of established themes and sub-themes devolved from 30 to 19 to a final tally of 16 (Table 1).

Table 1

Themes and Sub-Themes Identified From Youth (n = 19) Interview Data

Theme	Sub-Themes
Sampling Sport	Positive Affect Toward Sport
	Positive Affect Toward Tennis
	Sport Event Attendance
	Varsity and Club Team Visits
Emotional Management	Sport/Physical Activity as an Emotional Release
	Anger Management
Development Outcomes	Confidence
	Motivation
	Interpersonal Assets
Sports Mentoring	Positive Relationships
	Sense of Connection
	Role Models

## Reflexive Practice

Throughout this entire process of data collection, analysis, and interpretation we were mindful of our respective positions (formally and informally), existent power dynamics, and identities in relation to the program and its participants, as well as one another (Vadeboncoeur & Bopp, 2020). The research team was comprised of three individuals identifying as heterosexual, cisgender males, with two racially identifying as White and the third as Black. The PI (White) had a previous working relationship with the executive director from which an institutional research-service agreement with the SBYD program evolved. The two members of the research team were the PI and program's graduate assistants, respectively.

We recognize and were considerate toward the potential influence of our racial, cultural, and gender identities on participant responses, as well as our understanding and sharing of their lived experiences. Moreover, we acknowledge our educational upbringings and epistemological lenses influenced not only the questions asked, but also the perception and interpretation of participant responses and experiences through a singularly focused and privileged lens. (Vadeboncoeur et al., 2021). In doing so, we engaged with the data in an interpretive manner that resulted in complimentary and contradictory understandings and inferences, facilitating critical discussions that led each researcher to examine his values, assumptions, prior experiences, and frames of reference in relation to his analysis and interpretations of the data (Emery & Anderman, 2020). This reflexive practice was largely maintained through self-awareness of our perceptions and biases, self-reflection on said biases, and

purposes for our interest and engagement with work in this space.

## RESULTS

Aiming for our work to contribute to literature on sport sampling and SBYD programs, our thematic analysis of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2021) resulted in four themes (sampling sport, emotional management, development outcomes, and sports mentoring), comprised of 12 sub-themes. Supporting evidence can be found in the following extracts.

### Sampling Sport

Sampling sports can occur in a variety of settings with different levels of engagement Côté & Vierimaa, 2014). In the case of this program, participants pointed to participation in various sport and physical activities, attendance at several sporting events, visiting (and playing) with several campus club and varsity sport programs, as well as the program's use of professional athletes and sport vernacular in programming. These sampling opportunities resulted in the cultivation of more positive affect toward sport in general, with a particular emphasis on tennis. The interventions used in this process were also found to be noteworthy.

#### *Positive Affect Toward Sport*

Overall, the various sport sampling occurrences resulted in enhanced positive affect toward sports. Simply put by Jade, "it made me want to look into it and play more, play harder and want to get into different kinds of sports." But it was not just playing sports in which participants' interest grew, she went on to add that the program encouraged physical activity, "I've seen a lot of people go there not liking sports, not liking being physical...and that's the only thing they want to do now." Maggie supported such sentiments, adding "It made me more interested in sports because now I actually would love to play the game(s) when I get to high school." While Cindy doesn't have specific plans, she:

*always wanted to be in an extracurricular activity, but when it comes to sports, never really got the chance to. So, when I joined [program name], I was like, oh wow, a sport, exciting. After that, I kind of got interested in doing sports and stuff like that.*

Being introduced to formally unfamiliar sports also had a positive influence on perceptions of said sports. When sampling quidditch, a club sport adapted from the Harry Potter film series (Warner Bros., 2022), Marcus was suspicious at first, “I was like, what’s this? This game looks weird. It don’t even look fun. Then, when we finally got to play it, I was like, oh, this is actually pretty interesting and fun.” Lisa was also more open to sampling different sports because of being in the program: “I haven’t ever tried another sport but tennis and track, so this year I’m trying to open my options up and see what sport I really, really want to take on in my life or when I go to college.” Likewise, Carl’s attitude positively shifted because of the program’s sport sampling opportunities, admitting “I thought it was going to be boring, but definitely try new things because you don’t know if you’re going to like it or not. And so far, I’m really enjoying being here.” For many of the participants, tennis was a new sport and a focal point of the program.

### ***Positive Affect Toward Tennis***

It was not surprising that participants spent time reflecting on their experiences with tennis, as it was the primary sport on which this program focused. Despite minimal experience with the sport, several participants began playing tennis recreationally, and even for their school teams, like Mindy who shared:

*When I first started playing tennis, of course, I didn't really know how to do anything. And I went on to play, I would play it for fun. I just wanted to get better to beat people in games, and then that drove me to actually wanting to play the sport.*

The program was also good for Adrian: “I actually enjoyed that [tennis]. I mean, I wasn’t that good, but I actually enjoyed that. I guess that’s what made me want to play a little bit.” Even if the participants did not engage with tennis outside of the program, their perceptions of the sport seemed to improve. Lebron was not ready to totally commit to the sport but admitted, “I mean, I ain’t going to say like, I’m INTERESTED, interested, but at the same time, it’s kind of cool. Kind of straight.” Though it was not always the sport itself that endeared participants to it; the way the coaches (i.e., program administrators) introduced and taught the sport was beneficial. Mindy went on:

*I like playing tennis with [program name] because it's like we all get to have fun, even though a lot of us, we didn't know how to play at first. They always taught us and*

*made sure that we knew what we were doing in the end and all that stuff like that. They made sure that if we wanted extra help, they put us one-on-one with coaches. We would play games all together; always trying to make it fun.*

The sport sampling opportunities were not strictly limited to playing the games, but also attending several live sport events such as basketball, football, soccer, and tennis.

### ***Sport Event Attendance***

The overwhelming sentiment toward the live sport event experiences was positive, and for several different reasons. The direct outcome of engaging with sports as fans was not readily apparent in participants’ responses, but it was evident that being there was a positive influence on them. For many of the participants, attending various events was their first time to experience a sport in person, which stood out to Sherry:

*I usually don't go to college games or professional games, just because my parents won't take me. So, I mean, it was nice to actually get the experience of being able to go with [program name], since I never got the experience before. My first football game was with [program name], and my first volleyball, college volleyball game and swimming and gymnastics and basketball. I never knew about gymnastics, and I didn't know anything about it. And swimming because I never been to a swim meet before.*

Mindy enjoyed how different sports had different environments:

*tennis was just different than [football and basketball] because we have to be quiet for most of the round. After the point is over, that's when we can cheer, and we can make noise and all. But that was a good experience to me.*

Cindy enjoyed the atmosphere of the football game enough to want to go back:

*I'm not really a football girl...But when I went there, it was like, everybody's just cheering, and they're so happy. And they're excited about who's winning, who's losing and stuff like that. And then half time. All of that, I was like, "Okay, this is like, this is very thrilling to see. I want to come back.*

The impact of being at the football game was positive for Lisa as well:

*just to see the experience, how people take the game so serious. I can just see [the game] on TV, but I can't see the peoples' reactions and stuff. But just seeing them up and close, people really will die for this game...it just was a good time."*

The integration of live sporting events into the SBYD program not only had a positive influence on participant experiences, but this finding contributes to our conceptual characterization of sport sampling.

### **Varsity and Club Team Visits**

Another means by which the program offered sport sampling opportunities was through engagement with several of the university's varsity and recreational sport teams:

*It's been a couple of them that come out and teach us something new and productive to do...Sometimes I wouldn't be in the mood, but when I really get into it, then it's just like, "Oh, wow, okay. I like this. I mean, I'm going to keep on doing it. I like it." So, it's not all bad as I'm making seem when I have first impressions. (Cindy)*

The quidditch club team visit also helped Jade, who is not interested in mainstream sports, feel more included and appreciated: "I'm a big Harry Potter fan, so to think I could actually play that in the real world was kind of fun; just to watch everyone have fun with it and experience some of the things that I like." Other sports were specifically mentioned as well. Cindy "always wanted to play volleyball, but never really got the chance. So some days, they have people come and teach us how to play volleyball. I really enjoyed that because that's a sport I've always wanted to play." LeBron "learned way more about soccer than I knew before, [and] still want to play it."

Aside from learning about and experiencing different sports, these visits had the supplemental benefit of educating participants on how sport can contribute to personal development and other benefits of interscholastic play. Adrian liked to hear from the players "what they did to make it that far, and what advice do they have for their younger selves" in school. Similarly, Sherry appreciated learning "what it takes to be an athlete in college, that was a

very big day. They were telling us, besides teaching us how to play the sport itself." She went on to describe how the quidditch club team was not about fiercely competing and winning, but "was more for fun. They were basically telling us, how, even though you're in college, you could still have fun and have time to rest, just leisure." This further elucidates how and why athletes are often looked up to as role models (discussed in a later theme).

### **Emotional Management**

Participants revealed how their involvement with sport and physical activity in the SBYD program provided them with a space and opportunities to constructively manage their emotions. Specifically, sport participation and physical activity manifested as a means toward emotional release and anger management.

#### ***Sport/Physical Activity as an Emotional Release***

A consistent benefit of the program were the opportunities for youth to utilize sport and physical activity as a means of emotional release. Terri appreciated the chance to "get out my energy," while Cindy enjoyed playing sports to "keep me going" and "make my energy run a little bit". Lisa found playing tennis to have a "calming" effect, allowing her to "get a lot out". In this regard, tennis specifically served as a stress release for many participants, providing a space to unburden themselves from the day's worries and personal cares. For instance, Maggie played to "get all my stress out" and Tasha capitalized on the sport to "take [her] stress away". Adrian just "liked the feeling of hitting [the ball]". Later in the interview, Lisa provided insight into how tennis served as both a release and a means to help manage her anger:

*Imagine a problem is on the ball and I hit it as far as I can to get it out to release my stress or if a person makes me mad or if a coach, I just put their name on the ball and just hit it as far as it goes.*

#### ***Anger Management***

Lisa went on to add, "I just let all the anger come out of me." In this manner, sport and physical activity served as a lesson on how to restrain, re-orient, and/or manage angered emotions. Marcus shared that when he gets mad, he used to "be ready to fight. But now, I just take my anger out on the court or the field", and that this approach "felt good.

I feel better than I have”. Cindy learned that when she’s angry with someone, she does not “have to let it out on other people. I can let out with the sport that I’m doing.” Similarly, when Alan plays basketball, “if I am mad, it lets me take my anger out.” JJ put it most succinctly when asked what he liked about the program’s sport and physical activity opportunities: “Let me see, you get to control your anger.”

Our findings suggest that this SBYD program successfully utilized sports and sport sampling to help participants understand and navigate their emotional skillsets in a culturally relevant and socially responsible manner “based on youth’s social realities” (Camiré et al., 2021, p. 9).

### Development Outcomes

As a SBYD program, the administrators were intentional in their efforts toward the development of psychological-based assets and positive outcomes through sport. This was conveyed in the participants responses as they spoke of increased confidence and motivation to engage with sport and physical activity. The development of individual and interpersonal assets was also prominent among the discussions.

### Confidence

Program administrators and coaches are trained to be encouraging and supportive; the outcome of which is a positive influence on the participants confidence, particularly relative to their sport and physical abilities. Shanice said she “used to just be bad at everything, but now that I’m confident, I can play sports with other people”. Similarly, Alan “used to not be confident playing with the older kids...but [the program] pushed me to be better. I feel now that I’m better. I feel like I’m able to play with the bigger kids.” In reference to sampling a new sport (i.e., roller hockey), Jade revealed that “it was super hard. I wanted to give up and stop playing but watching everyone else and having everybody else encourage me boosted my confidence and wanted to keep going and keep trying”. Moreover, Jade appreciated coaches:

*staying by my side and not letting me think any less of myself with challenges. Just knowing that I can do it. Once I put time into it and I learned everything that I need to do, that nothing can stop me.*

Tammy found strength from the “activities I do. It’s made me more confident, like when, when I look back to what I did. It encouraged me too...if I did that, then I can deal with this, what I’m doing right now”. These last two sentiments

demonstrate that the skills and assets youth were developing through sport and physical activity, could be applied and were transferable to other aspects of their lives, not just sport.

### Motivation

Likewise, the encouragement and positivity demonstrated by program coaches and volunteers during physical activities motivated the participants to be more active and not give up. “By just hearing the coaches talk about striving, and doing better, and working hard to get where you want to get in life” has had a positive influence on Adrian. Lisa added, “Just the talks. They be like, ‘Just do it and good things will come out of it’.” This helped Maggie to overcome her self-perceived lack of athleticism; “My motivation has somewhat increased. I’m not really a sporty type of girl, but I will get up to play some sports.” But it was not just the coaches and volunteers serving as motivators, the diversity of program activities had a positive influence. In reference to the program schedule, Marcus said “the sports and rec time make me feel more active, make me want to go out there even more to practice”. Jade has gotten:

*more interested in physical activity. Before I wasn't really physically active. I was more liking to relax kind of person, but now I just want to get up. I want to be physically active because the program has inspired me to want to be. By activities and field trips. Just seeing how fun physical activity is, makes me want to do it more.*

Similarly, Sherry shared that the sampling of sports:

*opened me up to new experiences, sports that I never learned about before, sports I've never played before. So, them helping me experience these sports, I got to learn, a lot of these are fun. A lot of them I enjoy. So now you have something to do, that's definitely motivated me to be more active.*

### Interpersonal Assets

The youth participants also spoke to the development of interpersonal skills through their engagement with sport and physical activity. Specifically addressing tennis, Jade appreciated:



*the important life lessons it teaches me, like discipline, patience, understanding. Because there's just so many things about tennis. It's not just a sport. It makes you yourself. It teaches you about things about yourself that you just didn't know you needed to know.*

Tennis also taught Adrian “how to do other things too. Like, stay focused, pay attention to where the ball is going, and stuff. Communicating with other players.” More generally speaking, LeBron shared a similar sentiment, “I liked that you were able to have fun, and at the same time, be like disciplined, learning life skills, other than basketball or whatever sport you're playing”. The development of communication and social skills was also addressed by Cindy:

*I need to stop pushing myself onto people. You know? I also need to learn how to isolate myself in certain situations. I've learned when to talk when not to talk to people. So that has helped me with those types of social skills because I did have a bad habit of throwing myself on people and they didn't want to be bothered, stuff like that.*

The practice of sport mentoring was an intervention utilized throughout the program to help participants recognize, reflect upon, and reinforce their development of interpersonal and life skills.

### **Sports Mentoring**

At the center of the program's vision is family. Utilizing sport, particularly tennis, the program aims to develop and support youth, their families, and the local community through holistic and unified efforts. Thus, it was not surprising to hear participants discuss the sense of connection they have to the program, as well as the relationships with individuals within it, that were facilitated and enhanced through sport participation (Wegner et al., 2022).

### **Positive Relationships**

A major reason why participants feel so connected to the program results from the relationships they develop with coaches and volunteers. Trauma-informed training helped provide the coaches and volunteers with the tools needed to build a rapport with the participants on a deeper level. Said Lisa, “I just was going through a lot, I guess. They really helped me because I got close to [anonymized coach] and she really helped me, and then I met Coach G. I'm close to them now.” She went on to recall the “close bonds” she has

with people in the program and specifically addressed how “you can get really close with the coaches. You just feel more comfortable...I like bonding with the coaches because they're always going to be by your side.”

Capitalizing on the opportunities for sport mentorship further strengthened these relationships. Coaches would utilize sports to “talk about striving, and doing better, and working hard to get where you want to get in life (Lisa).” Alan gave the example of how he likes to talk with a particular coach before he plays, “I ask for their help. They always give me the correct support.” Such support comes in different forms, Tammy says, “they have been encouraging me to do more activities” and Shanice appreciates that “they discipline you when you need to be disciplined.”

Such positive relationships were also reinforced through sport and physical activity outside of the program, partly because of familiarity and skill development from sports sampled while in the program. Becoming more knowledgeable with various ways of being physically active, and gaining the health benefits of doing so, resulted in program participants being more active with their families when at home. This was particularly important for participants when facilities and resources were inaccessible (e.g., lack of finances, COVID-19 shutdown). Tammy discussed how she would “walk around the block in our neighborhood a lot, and me, my brother and my dad, we ride our bikes together”. In fact, many of the youth in this study would go on walks (Kersey and Lisa) and/or bike rides (Jade and Mindy) with their parents or siblings. Other examples of being physically active with family included Terri exercising with her sister, who also “let's me play basketball with her”; Alan working out with his cousin and friend at the neighborhood gym; and Tasha having races, running around a field, and playing basketball and kickball with her sister. Even when family members were not active with the youth, they still offered support. Maggie's mom “motivates me to actually get into a sport and keep playing sports”. And even though she does not like to walk, Sherry's mom “still tries to urge me to go anyway”. Sampling sports can manifest in a variety of ways, and regardless of whether it was watching, discussing, or being active together, the relationships developed in and out of the program were enhanced through their shared interest and participation in sport and physical activity. This further led to a greater sense of connection with the program and people there within.

### ***Sense of Connection***

There were several examples given to describe how participants feel connected to the program. Jade discussed how engaging with sport in different spaces opened her eyes to the bonds being developed. Of particular relevance is her mention of the program participants and volunteers as a “team”. Thinking back, she said:

*it was great to go through all of those experiences and everything that I could there because we're a family. And it was nice to see like, we're actually a family. All of us had our different places, but at end we still came together as a family and encouraged the team and got to spend time with each other.*

Lisa reiterated the feeling of family and care, “If something happens to you, they'll be sick worried about you. That's what I love. That family.” JJ also liked being a part of the program “because it's like family” and “a good way to meet new people.” LeBron corroborated and appreciated the opportunity to “make new friends.” Alan shared how participating in sports while at the program strengthened relationships:

*he's didn't really like me in school. So, he came up to me. My jump shot was not working, I was missing all my shots. I thought he was going to take the ball and start playing with it. But he took the ball out of my hand when I was about to do my jump shot, and he told me how to grip the ball, then how to flick your wrist when you shoot it.*

Jade also mentioned the development of positive relationships forged through sport, “We dance. We play. We just connect with each other on a more physical level...I like the teamwork; you just feel like you're connected with everyone.”

### ***Role Models***

Lastly, the use of sport figures as role models aided in the sport mentoring process. Many of the study participants named professional Black athletes, particularly players in the National Basketball Association (May, 2009), as their favorite players and role models. With tennis promoted as the program's primary sport intervention, it was also not surprising that many participants named Serena Williams as an influence on their interest in and desire to play tennis. Knowing this, the SBYD program capitalized (Re: sampled) on diverse role models to introduce, teach, and reinforce some of the intangibles learned in various sports.

For instance, Shanice was drawn to Serena's “motivation” and Jeff acknowledged appreciation for “her passion, her strength, and she's good”. Lisa found strength in the Black female athletes that she considered role models. She admired Serena's place in and impact on tennis history as one of (if not the) best, “I like her because she just put a mark on tennis” and proved that “girls can do what men do”. And she identified with Simone Biles, “I like gymnastics too. I like Simone because she has the same... She has the same problem as me, so I just look up at her even more”. Tasha also identified with Biles, “she has a story, and it's a movie, and I like the movie”. Admitted Mindy, “I always say Serena Williams, but that's kind of being biased”. She went on, “Serena Williams was the first tennis player I ever heard of. I didn't think tennis was exciting; I thought it was boring before”. In addition to making the game of tennis exciting for Mindy, Serena's perseverance also had a positive influence: “She's been playing for a really long time. You rarely see her giving up too easily. And on top of that, she just had a child and then she got back on the court”.

The use of commonly shared sport vernacular and role models facilitated the sport mentoring process and facilitated personal connections. The resultant positive relationships allowed for coaches, volunteers, and family members to better relate to the program participants and tailor program activities and interventions to better meet the development needs of each youth and further enhanced the relevance and transference of skills (Choi et al., 2015; Shiver & Jacobs, 2020).

### **DISCUSSION**

The purpose of this study was to examine the program design, curriculum, and resultant impact of sport sampling opportunities offered in an afterschool SBYD program working with racially and economically marginalized youth. Overall, the sport sampling experiences of the participants were a positive influence on their engagement with sport and physical activity. From attending games, interacting with sport teams, and learning about and participating in (relatively) new sports, participant responses revealed that youth were afforded opportunities to engage with and understand sport and physical activity on a personal level. In doing so, the participants enhanced their interpersonal and socioemotional development.

It was evident from participant responses that the primary result of sampling diverse sport and physical activities sparked an interest and nurtured a desire to continue being active. This positive affect displayed toward sport extended beyond the program boundaries, with several participants sharing how they were or had intentions to play for their school teams (e.g., tennis). With school being purported as the primary “societal vehicle for young people’s regular physical activity” (Bailey, 2016, p. 15), school-based interventions are critical in the development and the promotion of healthy physical activity and personal fitness among youth (Yuksel et al., 2020). However, diminishing resources (e.g., time, finances) needed to supplement physical education and movement during the school day are contributing to an increase in sedentary lifestyles among children, disparately impacting youth from disenfranchised communities (Bernal et al., 2020). Our study demonstrates that when schools do not have the resources to provide the appropriate inclusion of physical activity and education in their curriculum, afterschool SBYD programs can serve as a critical external development asset for youth.

The transformative and intentional use of nontraditional sports to engage youth was beneficial in creating a more inclusive space, individually and at the communal level. For instance, Jade did not consider herself a “sporty” girl, but the quidditch team visit provided her with an opportunity to open, share some of her interests, and be a more active participant in the program. This in turn helped strengthen her sense of connection to the program and her peers. Moreover, sampling nontraditional sports and physical activities (i.e., quidditch) reinforced important life lessons about first impressions of activities and the groups of people who might populate them, demonstrating how sport and physical activity, when appropriately planned, can serve as a vehicle for social change and inclusion (Cohen et al., 2014; Trussell, 2020). Here, the operative notion of “appropriately planned” undergirds our primary contention, which is that (positive) youth development through sport is contingent on the careful consideration and balance of how a sport is delivered and experienced, as well as the social contextual factors present within the lives of participating youth (Cohen & Ballouli, 2018). Sport sampling youth sport as an antecedent to exercise and activity in adulthood reveals variety in sport and physical activity experiences and opportunities serves as a psychosocial mediator to foster a physically engaging lifestyle (Sylvester et al., 2020). To be mindful of this reality is to acknowledge and see to it that wide-ranging benefits of sport sampling are afforded to racially marginalized youth, in turn providing these youth with the health and psychosocial developmental

skills needed to engage within and outside of sport.

For example, we found that individual development assets were enhanced through our youth’s participation in and sampling of sports. Though they may have been contextualized within the frame of physical activity, assets such as confidence and motivation had progressed among many of the youth and were revealed to transfer into other areas of participants’ lives. Similarly, participants shared that the sports and physical activities offered in this program had beneficial effects on their mental health and wellbeing. This was an intentional goal of the program, as many of its youth have experienced some level of socioeconomic or familial trauma. Sport and physical activity are utilized to facilitate opportunities for youth to (re)engage with their emotional selves, overcome emotional barriers via protective assets, as well as learn to better navigate, regulate, and cope with emotional stress and trauma (Whitley et al., 2018). Conflict resolution and anger management are just two of individual assets that were taught, practiced, and enhanced through purposeful participation in sport. With the varying levels of physicality and action, youth were able to sample different activities to find the most appropriate ways for them to (re)direct their anger and other emotions toward healthier outcomes.

Previous work has found that one’s lifelong engagement with sport and physical activity can be intensely influenced through the alignment and formation of racial identity development and self-schema (Harrison et al., 2002; Newman et al., 2021). Accordingly, we found the athletes to whom these youth look up were racially similar and manifest many of the life skills, individual assets, and personal strengths that are central to the educational curriculum of the SBYD program. Due to both overt and covert socialization processes, African American teens are socialized into sports at a heightened level compared to their White counterparts (Beamon, 2010). This can result in deleterious effects on, and disparate outcomes associated with, academic achievement and experiences (Cooper et al., 2017), increased pressures for sport achievement and lower levels of career readiness, and hampered identity development (Brewer & Petitpas, 2017). Knowing this, the program was intentional to increase educational resources and provide experiential learning opportunities about other non-sport careers (e.g., computer engineering and programming), yet did capitalize on the participants’ favorite athletes to articulate and

demonstrate important values and character traits such as perseverance, hard work, and professionalism. Such activities and curriculum afforded students with dual identity development opportunities that highlighted and encouraged both their academic and athletic potential (Dexter et al., 2021).

Moreover, being in the safe space of a trusted SBYD program, we found that youth were not hampered by racialized sport stereotypes and felt free to try new activities. This lends credence to the value of sport sampling in SBYD programs as we infer from this that the more sports with which youth engage, the more opportunities they are provided to learn from nontraditional role models and cultural influences (Rockhill et al., 2022). Additionally, the more varied sport and physical activity offerings are, the more likely it is the needs and interests of youth with diverse identities can be satisfied (Cohen et al., 2012). Thus, we recommend the practice and conceptual understanding of sport sampling be expanded to encompass an array of engagement with and influence from sport-participating role models.

Program administrators strategically utilized sport terminology to align and reinforce the sport-based development aspects of the program. Volunteers were referred to as “coaches” and documents such as progress reports and daily motivations were sport themed. To aid youth development, particularly in the space of emotional regulation and intelligence, all coaches had to successfully complete trauma-sensitive training; a program facet critical to maintain a feeling of welcomeness and culture of caring for youth participants. This can be particularly important for SBYD programs that work with racially and economically marginalized youth, yet acquire assistance from volunteers primarily from White, middle-class backgrounds (Shiver & Jacobs, 2020). External assets such as parents, siblings, friends, other relatives, and non-family connections were also found to be of influence on our participants, which aligns with extant literature on how these assets can influence and be influenced by, both positively and negatively, engagement with and outcomes derived from youth sport development programs (Jones et al., 2017).

### Limitations and Future Research

As researchers, we recognized and took steps to minimize the potential influence of our racial, cultural, and gender identities on the interpretation of participant responses. Through the practice of reflexivity, we were diligent in maintaining awareness of our perceptions and biases toward participants and made efforts to avoid examining participant experiences through a singularly focused and privileged

lens. Yet, we acknowledge it is likely that not all bias was able to be negated. Another limitation stems from the timing of the data collection, which required participants to recall their sport sampling experiences rather than curating them in real time. However, this also provided time for the outcomes of such experiences to manifest in the daily lives of participants. Regardless, future studies would do well to collect data longitudinally, as well as prior to and after the sport sampling interventions. The robustness of our data revealed findings that were considered outside of the scope of this project (e.g., health and nutrition, program administration, and cultural competency). Thus, we recommend future research focus on these aspects of SBYD programming, as well as the experiential learning opportunities afforded to undergraduate and graduate students working on campus with the program.

### CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to examine the role, programmatic strategy, and impact of sport sampling opportunities offered in an afterschool SBYD program; with consideration given to the backdrop of the social contextual factors that influence the sporting realities of racially and economically marginalized youth. Our findings support previous literature speaking to the unique context of sport to afford participants practical applications and opportunities to acquire and improve skills, attitudes, and knowledge toward development of a positive sense of self, greater human and social capital, and enhanced personal skills and competencies (Coakley, 2011; Jones et al., 2017; Perkins & Noam, 2007; Petitpas et al., 2017; Turnnidge et al., 2014). Our study also contributes to literature (Ivy et al., 2018; Riley & Anderson-Butcher, 2012; Wegner et al., 2022) speaking to the unique environment(s), capacities, resources (e.g., human, financial, infrastructure, facilities, etc.), local communities and institutions of higher learning can provide by collaborating with SBYD programs. Such campus-community partnerships serve to the development of youth program participants as well as provides educational and experiential benefits for volunteering undergraduate and graduate students (Whitley et al., 2017).

Additionally, our findings add to current literature on sport sampling which has been generally understood as participating in more than one sport, or different iterations of the same sport, as well as staving off deliberate practice and an all-encompassing pursuit of successful (often elite) skill development in a single sport (Côté et al., 2020).

Results from our study suggest sport sampling to include more than simply participating in various sports. That is, we propose sport sampling be conceptually extended to account for all types of engagement with multiple and diverse sports. For instance, youth in this program benefitted from a myriad of designed and intentional sport and physical activity engagement opportunities, including sport participation, attending sport events, and interacting with (student) athletes that they might not otherwise be aware of or given the chance. Being in-person to feel the “thrilling” atmosphere of a sporting event or witness the beauty and power of athletic performances instilled a feeling of wanting more, which we argue has the capacity to create a foundation for future healthy engagement with sport and physical activity (Gallant et al., 2017). Understanding sport sampling in this manner provides SBYD programs with another resource to enhance the enjoyment, interpersonal development assets, and emotional intelligence of participants through their involvement with sport and physical activity.

### Conflicts of Interest

At the time of data collection, the principal investigator had an existing research services agreement with the SBYD program. In addition to undertaking reflexive practice with all members of the research team, the authors remained aware of their position and followed IRB-approved protocol to alleviate any relevant competing interest.

### Funding

There is no funding to report for this project.

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