

# GENDRON, MARTIN

University of Quebec at Rimouski

É. Frenette, P. Valois, C. Goulet

Doctoral Stipend 2012

## *Survey on Participation in Amateur Soccer in Canada*

---

### **Project abstract**

In general, sport is seen as a powerful contributor to social and personal development (Sport Canada, 2002). The benefits of physical activity and sport have been the subject of numerous studies (Gendron et al., 2005; Parfitt & Eston, 2005). Nonetheless, the number of young North Americans who play sports has been decreasing for a number of years (CDC, 2005, 2006; Sport Canada, 2003). In 1998, barely half of Canadian children aged 5–14 were actively involved in sport (Sport Canada, 2000). Why does participation in physical activity and sport decline constantly among Canadian, beginning in adolescence? Soccer, the most frequently played federated sport in the country, is a world-wide phenomenon that knows no boundaries or limitations and enjoys unprecedented popularity among young people. How can we learn from the sport situation in Canada in order to maintain a solid rate of participation among young people in a healthy and formative environment?

The *Survey on Participation in Amateur Soccer in Canada* had four objectives: (1) to develop and validate four versions of the survey questionnaire (player, parent, trainer, referee; English and French versions); (2) to compare the views of players, parents, trainers and referees in terms of the factors that could influence participation in soccer among U12 to U18 players; (3) to identify the factors relating to the decision of young Canadian players to start participating and to continue or abandon the sport. The results will be used to compare the views of the various stakeholders and to identify the positive aspects and potential issues. Preventive action may be recommended. The ultimate purpose of this research is to help produce healthy, responsible and engaged Canadians.

---

### **Research methods**

In total, 3,178 participants filled out one of the four versions of the questionnaire (on paper or online) (n players = 1,395, of which 50.8% were women; n parents = 1,130 of which 61.0% were women; n coaches = 557 of which 85.8% were men; n referees = 96, of which 78.2% were men). The participants were recruited on a voluntary basis through an invitation sent by the Fédération de Soccer du Québec and the Ontario Soccer Association to their clubs/members. The four versions of the questionnaire (which were later translated from French to English) were developed and validated with either an expert committee and/or a sample of players.

Two theoretical approaches were used because of their complementarity. In terms of development, Bandura's social learning theory (1986) was selected: according to this theory, people develop through a constant bidirectional influence of three sets of factors: personal, behaviour and the environment. This behavioural theory was chosen because specialists agree that in addition to specific personal predispositions, the environment and the individual play an important role in behavioural adoption (Kauffman, 2005; Weinberg & Gould, 1997). Moreover, having four sources of information (players, parents, coaches and referees) provides additional information.

In terms of environment, Ajzen's theory of planned behaviour (1985) was chosen in order to study the effect of environmental and political interventions on the adoption and maintenance of an active lifestyle. The Ajzen model (1985) verifies whether an environment is conducive to the practice of physical activities such as soccer, either through the quality of the conditions of play, the quality of the sport and leisure equipment or the quality of the physical activity programs offered. The different scales of the theory of planned behaviour present acceptable internal consistency coefficients: behavioural beliefs (11-12 items,  $\alpha = .61$  to  $.66$ ); normative beliefs (17-18 items,  $\alpha = .73$  to  $.89$ ); control beliefs (7 items,  $\alpha = .88$  to  $.94$ ); external variables – unsportsmanlike behaviours (11 items,  $\alpha = .89$  to  $.91$ ).

---

## Research results

Initial factors associated with participation. The four actors (players, parents, coaches, referees) agree on their first four choices of behavioural beliefs associated with the benefits of playing soccer (pleasure, physical fitness, friendships, technical improvements). In fact, these four factors are general and could well be found for other sports activities to explain the benefits the players wish to experience from playing a sport.

Factors associated with continuing participation. Opinions of family members can play an important role with respect to the factors associated with and influence on a given behaviour (ref. social standards and normative beliefs). When asked about the factors that could result in a player deciding not to continue playing league soccer in a subsequent season, the respondents' opinions are varied. The first choice of the four actors assigns a determining role to another person with the power to influence the player's decision to stop playing soccer (players = quality of refereeing; parents = quality of the coaches' training; coaches and referees = pressure from parents concerning the team's athletic performance). Among the list of factors, the choices (especially for players) focused on the atmosphere and the quality of the adults' training as a possible explanation for a potential decrease in pleasure in playing soccer and for ending participation altogether. The cost of basic equipment, the equipment provided by the club and the quality and availability of fields seem to have little impact.

The players' opinion on the ability to continue playing soccer in the future (ref. control beliefs) is less definite than that of the adults. The role of the father (and the father's opinion) with respect to the player's decision to continue or stop playing soccer seems to predominate over that of the mother. According to the results we obtained, star professional players are not a factor in amateurs' decisions to continue playing; as to whether star players have an influence on the behaviours of amateurs when they play their sport, another study will need to be carried out to investigate that question.

External variables – unsportsmanlike behaviours. The presence of unsportsmanlike behaviours (ref. verbal intimidation (VI), physical intimidation (PI), physical violence (PV)) represents a risk that a player will stop playing soccer. Among the factors with the most power to influence the player's decision to stop playing soccer, the four actors all had the same second reason, the presence of unsportsmanlike behaviour. Of 11 behaviours studied, intentional pushing (PI), elbowing (PV), mockery or sarcasm (VI) and insults (VI) are among the top five reasons given by all the actors. It should be noted that the players and referees (actors on the field) reported a much higher number of unsportsmanlike behaviours than did the parents or the coaches (the figure was almost double in some cases). The standard deviations are high, which leads to a large variability in results. This calls for caution in terms of interpreting and generalizing; complementary analyses will need to be done factoring in the differences based on variables such as sex, age and competition level.

Limitations of the study. The limitations include limited access in reaching participants by email (Ontario portion); the high cost of paper surveys on the sides of playing fields during tournaments; a sample from two

provinces (the majority from Quebec); and a representation between the sexes in each group that was not as expected (e.g. players, parents). Finally, the results of the questionnaire reflecting the view of each of the actors would benefit from being cross-validated through observations in a game setting.

---

### **Policy implications**

The results of this survey will give provincial and regional soccer associations and federations a better understanding of what makes young people take up a sport, continue participating in the sport and what affects their (possible) decision to continue to stop participating during adolescence. The strategic policies of the FSQ and the OSA and coach and referee training may be improved by taking into account the various results and findings. Moreover, the ethical code of each actor involved in the sport (players, parents, coaches, referees) may be enhanced and explained through the examples from the survey report. In addition, in light of these results, the Canadian Sport Policy (2012) may reiterate the importance of implementing a safe, healthy environment in which young people can play their sport by meeting their needs to have fun, stay active and healthy and to be surrounded by friends and adults who are skilled in their coaching and developmental roles.

---

### **Next steps**

The next steps of this research will include publishing the results of the analyses based on different variables (e.g. sex, age, competition level, region) and overcoming specific obstacles in order to do a follow-up with the participants (mini survey) to verify whether they continued or stopped playing soccer, and the reasons why. In terms of the adults, it would be worthwhile to further analyze the socioeconomic and familial issues related to soccer, especially for competition levels AA or higher (e.g. travel, various costs). A subsequent study could therefore focus on the influence of moral action (e.g. moral reasoning, moral atmosphere, social environment), as well as of pre-existing factors (frustration, activation), on the players' behaviour. By collecting the views of the players and adults involved (parents, coaches, referees) concerning moral action in given situations, we would like to better understand the process and factors influencing the decision of Canadian amateur soccer players to resort to aggression.

---

### **Key stakeholders and benefits**

For all the reasons listed in the "Policy implications" section, we would suggest distributing the report to the following organizations: Sport Canada, Soccer Canada, provincial and regional soccer associations and federations, the National Coaching Certification Program, the Officials Training and Certification Program, provincial physical activity promotion organizations (e.g. Kino-Québec, ParticipAction).