



## Research Article

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# Promoting Positive Youth Development Through Sports: Pilot Test of Relational and Character-Based Team Culture Resources Among Middle- and High-School Student- Athletes

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## Abstract

**Background:** Most youth sports coaches receive little training, especially in how to promote positive youth development (PYD) through sport. There is a continuing need to identify brief, easily applied interventions with a strong theoretical base and practical, effective activities for promoting PYD through youth sport. **Purpose:** The current study surveyed a racially and ethnically diverse sample of 262 6th-12th grade students from private independent schools and sports clubs across the U.S. to examine how a brief video series showcasing highly-accomplished athletes discussing character-building, mastery-oriented, and team climate messages, and accompanying activity guides, were linked to positive youth development outcomes **Methods:** Coaches were sent links to the videos and to accompanying activity guides. Coaches were asked to watch the videos with their teams and engage in a discussion/reflection or extended activity as recommended in the videos and user guides, at their pace but within 3-4 weeks. Four weeks after sending the video links, each school/club was sent a unique survey link. Following the consent procedures of the participating schools, coaches and student-athletes completed anonymous online surveys. **Findings:** Use of the resources was linked to greater odds of a team climate being high in competitive character building principles (called Compete-Learn-Honor), and in perceived developmental relationships. In turn, a competitive character-building team climate was linked to greater confidence in the coach, deriving a sense of purpose from their sport, and intention to continue in the sport. A team climate high in developmental relationships predicted greater confidence in coach and deriving purpose from their sport **Conclusion:** These brief and easy to implement resources are linked with a positive, mastery-oriented team climate and other aspects of student-athletes' positive youth development

**Keywords:** Coach-athlete relationships, Positive youth development, Youth sports culture, Sports coaching resources.

## INTRODUCTION

All youth need access to sporting experiences rich in positive youth-adult and peer-peer relationships that cultivate positive youth development (PYD) and allow them to perform at their personal best. And yet, data suggest that 1 in 3 young people in the U.S. quit sports every year, largely because of negative experiences with their coach, including pressure to win, and perceived rejection and disrespect <sup>[1]</sup>. Yet the loss of student-athletes is unsurprising given that fewer than 3 in 10 youth sports coaches say they have been trained on how to create a positive culture and effectively motivate their student-athletes <sup>[2]</sup>. Coaches who lack training and understanding of the impact of the sporting climate on PYD are at risk of reducing young people's enjoyment of the sport experience, unintentionally promoting negative character outcomes such as cheating, and ultimately deterring athletes from continuing in sports and therefore not fully experiencing all the positive experiences that sports have to offer <sup>[3, 4]</sup>.

### The Importance of Relationships

The coach-athlete relationship is a critical part of the relational developmental system in sports (along with parents, and even more important, peers<sup>[5]</sup>), and affects how coaches establish the social norms

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around expected actions related to team values [6]. For example, Huynh and colleagues [7] found it was the emotional trust from the quality of their relationships that led to coaches' overall influence on student-athletes' personal, athletic, and academic development, and influence on positive team climate. Likewise, Jowett and colleagues [8] have described a taxonomy of coaching relationships as a combination of prizewinning (which they call "successful") and helpful/caring ("effective") dimensions that involve the several coach-athlete relationship constructs of closeness, commitment, and complementarity.

### Current Study

There has been some evidence that character-based training programs can equip coaches with tools to help create these relationship-rich environments for building PYD [9], but the findings are mixed [10, 11]. There is a continuing need to identify brief, easily applied interventions with a strong theoretical base and practical, effective activities for promoting PYD through youth sports.

In this pilot study, we created a series of brief videos and user guides for coaches with the goal of embedding in them the principles of PYD, the Developmental Relationships Framework [12], and a psychological and sport science evidence-based approach to sports coaching and player development focused on building competitive character, called Compete-Learn-Honor® [13].

The Developmental Relationships Framework (DR) expands on five key ways coaches and other adults can deepen their interactions with student-athletes so they can become even more influential role models and mentors, on and off the playing field: Express Care, Challenge Growth, Provide Support, Share Power, and Expand Possibilities [14-16]. The Compete-Learn-Honor approach (CLH), originally designed for tennis, helps coaches build new mental and emotional habits in their players so young people can play their sport with greater purpose, less focus on winning and losing, giving 100% effort, being an open, curious, and humble learner, and loving and honoring the game [16-18]. Studies have reported that when young athletes define themselves based on character and a greater purpose (i.e., purpose-based identity) rather than on the results of performance (i.e., performance-based identity), they not only benefit in their emotional well-being [19] but they also can perform better [20].

## METHOD

### Recruitment Protocol

Using existing connections in both private independent schools and clubs, we asked select school and club athletic directors to recruit coaches of 12-18 year olds who would be willing to participate in the pilot use and study of these resources. Coaches were asked to watch the videos with their teams and engage in a discussion/reflection or extended activity as recommended in the videos and user guides, at their pace but within 3-4 weeks. Four weeks after sending the video links, each school/club was sent a unique survey link. The recruitment materials stressed that students would complete the surveys anonymously with no personally identifying information included, and that no one would know how individual students responded. The official consent procedures of each participating school and club were followed. Regardless of permission procedure used by schools and clubs, student-athletes gave their own assent when they accessed the survey online.

### Participants

A total of 262 students in grades 6-12 completed the student survey (demographic details in Table 1). These students were recruited from 11 private independent schools and sports clubs from varied geographic areas, including Hawai'i, New England, and the South and

Southwest U.S. A total of 17 coaches also participated in surveys, but because of the small number, we report only selected responses to two open-ended questions for coaches. The student sample was comprised of 60% identifying as male, 37% female, 1% transgender, and 1% identified as another gender identity. By school level, 22% were middle level (grades 6-8) and 78% high school (grades 9-12). The sample was 53% White, 17% Asian, 13% Hispanic/Latina/o, 8% Multiracial, 5% Black/African American, 3% Pacific Islander, 1% Native American/Alaska Native, and 1% identified as another race/ethnicity. The participating student-athletes from the sports clubs were almost exclusively underserved youth of color. There were 15 different sports represented in the data, with the largest representation being from volleyball (25%), tennis (15%), lacrosse (15%), baseball (13%), and soccer (10%). There was a wide range of years students had been playing the sport they used for reference in responding to the survey, with 25% in their 1<sup>st</sup> year, and 32% having played the sport for 7+ years.

### Creation of the Videos and Activity Guides

We identified three influencers to create videos for this project: legendary softball pitcher Cat Osterman, teenage U.S. Paralympian Ezra French, and retired NFL football star Jermaine Kearse. We gave each athlete a very generic overview of the topics that emphasized an empathetic, empowering, and equitable team setting and asked them to speak to those topics using their own experiences. Athletes were then recorded in an interview approximately 25-minutes in length that was then edited to the final short length of no more than roughly 3 minutes, mixing in still photos of the athletes, simple reinforcing text, and suggested discussion and action items at the end of each video (e.g., "What do people do, how do they act when they're being a great teammate?"). We also produced two activity guides as downloadable PDFs ([https://www.pathsports.org/\\_files/ugd/ec2697\\_f9601c63a1eb4cbb924e0836f0dfe411.pdf](https://www.pathsports.org/_files/ugd/ec2697_f9601c63a1eb4cbb924e0836f0dfe411.pdf)). They provided links to the 3 videos, 2-3 takeaway messages for each, 3-4 suggested team discussion questions, 2-4 ways to practice (these were suggested activities beyond the initial discussions), and 2-3 "reflection questions" for coaches to think about, to further integrate the messages and principles into their everyday coaching philosophy and practice planning.

The second guide provided more detail about exactly how to do the various exercises and activities that were only briefly described in the basic guide, as well as how to integrate developmental relationship- and character-building into everyday approaches, not just special "activities." Detailed instructions for doing more than one dozen exercises and activities were included, adapted from resources for building Developmental Relationships [21] and the Compete-Learn-Honor habits [18].

### Measures

All data come from student-athlete self-report surveys administered via an online platform. CFAs on measures with more than three items showed good fit for the developmental relationships measure, and promising but mixed results for the remaining measures, with good fit on the CFI and SRMR fit indexes, and close but not quite at commonly-used levels of acceptable fit on most measures using the TLI and RMSEA indexes (available from authors).

*Use and Perceived Impact of Resources.* The 4-item *Resource Use* index ( $\alpha = 0.72$ ) included items like: "I watched all 3 videos;" "Other than the discussions [after the videos], we did some special activities related to the videos". *Perceived Impact* was measured with five items ( $\alpha = 0.85$ ): e.g., "The discussions helped me think about the messages in the videos;" "The videos, discussion, and activities have strengthened my relationship with my coach."

*Compete-Learn-Honor Team Climate.* A 10-item Compete-Learn-Honor Team Climate (CLH) measure was developed to measure experience of the competitive character-building principles of the CLH coaching and player development approach [16, 18]. The measure showed excellent reliability ( $\alpha = 0.92$ ). Student-athletes responded to a stem of “Does your program or team...” by saying how often they experienced aspects of a CLH team climate. Sample items included “Emphasize having fun and improving as much as winning;” “Teach students to see matches and games as something to learn from, whether they win or lose.”

*Developmental Relationships Team Climate.* The Developmental Relationships Team Climate (DR) measure was comprised of 10 items with excellent reliability ( $\alpha = 0.90$ ) that reflect the five elements of the DR framework as described in Pekel et al. [14] and Scales et al. [16], adapted for sports. Student-athletes responded to a stem of “Does your program or team...” by saying how often they experienced aspects of a DR team climate. Sample items included “Show students they are cared about whether they win or lose;” “Ask for students’ ideas when making team decisions.”

*Social-Emotional Competencies.* Social-Emotional Competencies were measured with five items reflecting each of the social-emotional competencies described by the Collaborative for Academic and Social-Emotional Learning [22]: Relationship skills, social awareness, responsible decision making, self-management, and self-awareness ( $\alpha = 0.72$ ). A sample item is “I can work with other people in a group or team to reach a goal.”

*Academic Motivation.* Academic Motivation was a 4-item measure reflecting effort on schoolwork and a mastery approach to learning that had been used in previous studies<sup>17</sup> (Author, 2019 [19];  $\alpha = 0.86$ ). A sample item is “I try hard on my school work, even if it is not graded.”

*Purpose from Sport.* Two items measured student-athletes’ deriving meaning, purpose, and joy from their sport, “Playing this sport adds joy to my life;” “Playing this sport adds meaning and purpose to my life” ( $r = 0.73$ ).

*Intention to Continue in Sport.* Student-athletes’ intention to continue in their sport was measured by 2 items modified from Wekesser<sup>[23]</sup>, “I intend to play this sport one year from now;” and “I am determined to play this sport one year from now” ( $r = 0.87$ ).

*Confidence in Coach.* Student-athletes’ confidence in their coach’s ability to motivate and prepare them for competition was assessed with 7 items modified from Myers et al.<sup>[24]</sup> ( $\alpha = 0.88$ ). Sample items asked how confident students were in their coach’s ability to: “Motivate you;” “Positively influence the character development of you and your teammates.”

### Analysis Plan

We examined the bivariate correlations between the program experience (resource use, perceived impact, CLH team climate, and DR team climate) and correlational outcomes (social-emotional competencies, academic motivation, confidence in coach, intention to continue in sport, and purpose from sport). Then we ran logistic regression models to yield Odds Ratios (ORs) describing the chances of scoring high on each of the correlational PYD outcomes if student-athletes scored high on a given predictor variable. Running the logistic regressions with demographic controls yielded numerous clearly spurious results (available from authors). Thus, we report the uncontrolled results for the aggregate sample and note in the Discussion the need for further research with larger demographic subsamples to adequately examine demographic generalizability.

## RESULTS

Means and standard deviations of key study variables are presented in Table 2. 93% of the student-athletes agreed (60%) or strongly agreed (33%) that they *enjoyed watching* the brief videos, and 93% agreed (50%) or strongly agreed (43%) that they *paid attention* as they watched the videos. As one coach also noted in a comment on their survey, “The videos and resource guides started important conversations that coaches and players need to have. Players enjoyed the videos and it led to enlightening conversations.” Another coach observed that “seeing and hearing the perspectives of professional athletes really helped reinforce values I already teach my student-athletes.”

### Association of Resource Use and Perceived Impact on Team Climate and PYD

The correlation matrix displayed in Table 3 shows that the more student-athletes reported that their coaches used the Positive Youth Development Through Sport videos and activities, and the more they felt those resources impacted team discussions and improved relationships, the more likely they also were to report a significantly stronger DR- and CLH-centered team climate, and three of the PYD outcomes: social-emotional competencies, purpose from their sport, and confidence in their coach. Using the resources was also significantly linked to academic motivation.

The logistic regression results in Table 4 show that student-athletes who reported high levels of using the new resources and perceiving positive impact from the resources were 3.1 times (use) to 5.9 times (perceived impact) more likely than those whose use and impact scores were lower to report higher levels of Compete-Learn-Honor centered team climate. Using the resources did not predict high levels of a developmental relationships team climate, but students who said the resources had a positive impact on discussions and relationships were 4.5 times more likely to report high levels of developmental relationships in their team climate. Both use (OR= 5.3) of the resources and perceived impact (OR= 10.0) strongly predicted high confidence in the coach, and perceived impact predicted purpose from sport (OR= 2.8). The model predicting social-emotional competencies did not converge due to insufficient variability in the outcome measure.

### Association of Developmental Relationships and Compete-Learn-Honor with PYD

Odds ratios in Table 4 show that student-athletes who experienced high levels of Compete-Learn-Honor in their team climate were significantly more likely to report higher levels of four of the five PYD indicators, including social-emotional competencies (OR= 13.9), confidence in their coach (OR= 46.2), intention to continue in their sport (OR= 2.6), and purpose from their sport (OR= 2.4), but not higher levels of academic motivation. Student-athletes who experienced high levels of developmental relationships in the team climate were significantly more likely to have confidence in their coach (OR= 77.0), and purpose from their sport (OR= 3.0), but not higher levels of social-emotional competencies, academic motivation, or intention to continue in their sport.

## DISCUSSION

In general, use of the resources was linked to better PYD outcomes and team climate, and both a DR and CLH team climate were associated with better PYD outcomes. Teams that used them more had team climates characterized by more Developmental Relationships and more emphasis on the principles of Compete-Learn-Honor, than teams that did not use the resources as much. The student-athletes from those teams were more likely to report better social-emotional

competencies, confidence in their coach, and garnering purpose from playing their sport.

The majority (93%) of student-athletes responded either “strongly agree” or “agree” to enjoying the videos and to paying attention during them. Considering that a national U.S. survey of nearly 22,000 high school students conducted right before the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>[25]</sup> showed 70% were bored at school—the second-highest emotion reported after feeling stressed (79%), this level of satisfaction and engagement with the resources must be considered both rare and promising. High levels of enjoyment and engagement cannot be overlooked as a key to learning effectiveness.

Further, if student-athletes reported high levels of CLH and DR in their team climate, they were much more likely to have high confidence in their coach, and derive a sense of purpose from their sport. Finally, *high levels of CLH also predicted higher odds of having social-emotional competencies, and student-athletes’ intentions to persist and stay involved in their sport.* That is, even though CLH and DR were strongly correlated ( $r = .82$ ), this study showed that CLH provided a significant value-add in promoting PYD more generally, and specifically for applied sport psychology, being significantly associated with student-athletes’ intention to persist and continue playing their sport.

Why might CLH have this effect? CLH centers task involvement, caring and respect, improvement as a person and not only as a student-athlete, and mastery and the joy of being challenged, as the true definition of success, rather than ego involvement, focus on the self, and winning. The top three dimensions of “fun,” in Visek and colleagues<sup>[26]</sup> fun-mapping study of students, parents, and youth sports coaches were being a good sport, trying hard, and positive coaching. Coaches who utilize the CLH approach are reinforcing all of those, as well as Visek et al.’s fourth highest-ranked dimension of fun, “learning and improving.”

**Implications for Coaching Practice**

This study shows the potential value of these new resources for intentionally cultivating positive youth development in sports contexts. Coaches did offer a few suggestions for improving them: They recommended including more coverage of the “mental aspect of sport,” incorporating even more team-building activities, representing more sports with examples in the videos and user guides, and making versions of the videos and activities tailored more for student-athletes younger than age 13.

These resources have the advantage of being relatively brief and readily and flexibly incorporated into practice designs and schedules (“short and to the point” as one coach described them). In a typical 2-hour high school sports practice, for example, 10-15 minutes using these resources a couple of times per week could provide meaningful value-add in promotion of a CLH and DR team climate and positive youth development, while consuming just 3%-5% of the 10 hours of typical weekly practice time. Even very brief psychosocial interventions can be quite effective<sup>[27]</sup>, making the ratio of “costs” to potential benefit from using these resources very attractive to coaches, athletic directors, and sports program managers.

**Limitations and Future Directions**

This pilot study was correlational, a cross-sectional study without a control or comparison group, which limits our ability to establish cause and effect. The hypothesized connection of these intentional PYD-building resources to important PYD outcomes and the hypothesized link of a Compete-Learn-Honor and Developmental Relationships team climate to those outcomes were demonstrated. It is plausible and even likely that the resources and CLH and DR team climates contributed to those desirable outcomes, but we cannot say this with certainty. The promising results of this pilot should be confirmed with a longitudinal study that also includes a control or comparison group. Future studies also need both larger samples with adequate demographic sub-cell sizes, and a sample that provides more variability in some of the outcomes than was possible in this convenience sample.

**Table 1:** Demographic and Background Characteristics of Student-Athlete Survey Participants

	Valid %		Valid %
Gender Identity		Sport Played <sup>a</sup>	
Female	37.4	Volleyball	23.2
Male	60.3	Tennis	14.7
Transgender	0.9	Lacrosse	13.7
Other	1.4	Baseball	11.9
Race/Ethnicity		Soccer	9.0
Asian	16.7	Softball	6.6
Black	4.9	Track and Field	5.7
Native American	0.5	Golf	5.2
Pacific Islander	2.9	Basketball	3.3
White	52.5	Water Polo	2.8
Other	1.0	Cross Country	< 1
Multiracial	8.3	Football	< 1
Hispanic or Latina/o	13.2	Hockey	< 1
Age		Ice Hockey	< 1
11-12	4.7	Rocket League electronic Sports	< 1
13-14	20.9	Swimming	< 1
15-16	41.9	Years Playing Named Sport	
17-18	31.6	0-1 year	25.4
19 or older	0.9	2-3 years	19.0
School Level		4-5 years	15.6
Middle School (Grades 6-8)	21.6	6-7 years	8.3
High School (Grades 9-12)	78.4	More than 7 years	31.7

Notes. N= 262 student-athletes from 11 independent schools across the U.S. <sup>a</sup> The percentages for Sport Played adds up to over 100% because some student-athletes wrote down more than one sport in response to this open-ended question.

**Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Key Study Variables**

	Mean [Max] (SD)	Valid % Low	Valid % High		Mean [Max] (SD)	Valid % Low	Valid % High
Developmental Relationships	22.65 [30] (6.26)	29.9%	70.1%	Social-Emotional Competencies	3.39 [4] (0.49)	2.1%	97.9%
Compete-Learn-Honor	23.17 [30] (6.53)	25.6%	74.4%	Academic Motivation	3.39 [4] (0.61)	5.4%	94.6%
Resource Use	3.87 [4] (1.16)	25.6%	74.4%	Confidence in Coach	2.68 [3] (0.41)	20.8%	79.2%
Perceived Impact	2.88 [4] (1.42)	21.3%	78.7%	Intention to Continue in Sport	3.54 [4] (0.73)	9.6%	90.4%
				Purpose from Sport	3.32 [4] (0.83)	15.1%	84.9%

Notes. N= 262 student-athletes from 11 independent schools across the U.S. [Max] = Upper range for this scale.

**Table 3: Correlations among Key Study Variables**

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1	Resource Use									
2	Perceived Impact	0.649***								
3	Compete-Learn-Honor	0.300***	0.346***							
4	Developmental Relationships	0.284***	0.368***	0.817***						
5	Social-Emotional Competencies	0.336***	0.263***	0.478***	0.435***					
6	Academic Motivation	0.172*	0.113	0.226***	0.193**	0.467***				
7	Confidence in Coach	0.242***	0.417***	0.609***	0.673***	0.400***	0.193**			
8	Intention to Continue in Sport	0.007	0.114	0.259***	0.164*	0.161*	0.140*	0.140*		
9	Purpose from Sport	0.141*	0.244***	0.271***	0.262***	0.277***	0.107	0.184**	0.505***	

Note. \* $p \leq .05$ , \*\* $p \leq .01$ , \*\*\* $p \leq .001$ .

**Table 4: Logistic Regression Models**

	Perceived Impact	CLH Team Climate	DR Team Climate	Social-Emotional Competencies	Academic Motivation	Confidence in Coach	Intention to Continue in Sport	Purpose from Sport
MODEL 1								
Resource Use	5.30***	3.11***	1.91	---	2.16	5.28***	0.47	1.59
R <sup>2</sup> <sub>NAGELKERKE</sub>	0.119	0.074	0.024		0.020	0.140	0.016	0.010
MODEL 2								
Perceived Impact		5.85***	4.54***	---	1.64	10.00***	0.79	2.79*
R <sup>2</sup> <sub>NAGELKERKE</sub>		0.156	0.117		0.006	0.199	0.002	0.046
MODEL 3								
CLH Team Climate				13.91*	1.53	46.29***	2.63*	2.37*
R <sup>2</sup> <sub>NAGELKERKE</sub>				0.171	0.005	0.518	0.038	0.035
MODEL 4								
DR Team Climate				6.97	1.86	77.00***	2.02	3.03**
R <sup>2</sup> <sub>NAGELKERKE</sub>				0.096	0.014	0.606	0.021	0.063

Notes. \* $p \leq .05$ , \*\* $p \leq .01$ , \*\*\* $p \leq .001$ . Odds ratios are reported. CLH = Compete-Learn-Honor. DR = Developmental Relationships. --- = Analysis could not be run due to insufficient variability in the outcome variable.

## CONCLUSION

Though more research on them is needed, the results of this pilot study showed that these resources emphasizing the building of developmental relationships and a Compete-Learn-Honor climate have promise for promoting positive, relationally rich team climates and PYD through youth sport. Moreover, they yielded these significant associations while still taking up only a relatively small amount of practice time to implement, a feature that should encourage youth sports coaches to use them.

## Conflict of interest

The authors reports no conflicts of interest.

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