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The North American Youth Club Sport Phenomena: An Investigation of Club Marketing Practice

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The North American Youth Club Sport Phenomena:
An Investigation of Club Marketing Practice

By

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A THESIS

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Abstract

Organized youth sport is purposeful sport participation integrating a systematic schedule, directed by adults, and requiring substantial commitment (Kjønniksen, Anderssen, & Wold, 2009). Club sport enables competitive experience through team membership, promoting personal development, healthy behavior, and elite performances.

Organized youth sport's emerging challenge is to attract and retain membership that is well aligned with their club's and coach's philosophy, thereby maximizing the pleasure in, and length of their participation. Attrition remains a persistent challenge reflecting the internal failings of sports clubs (Jakobsson, Lundvall, Redelius, & Engström, 2012).

Without a clearly articulated market offering, a club's purpose is vague, and it fails to attract and retain the desired membership. Through the use of a qualitative methodology this thesis examines the youth club market space to better understand club types and consumer expectations. Emergent themes suggest the need for improved strategic club-athlete alignment in order to enhance the experience for stakeholders.

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List of Abbreviations

LTS - Learn to Swim

NSO – National Sport Organization

PSO – Provincial Sport Organization

SNC – Swim Natation Canada

Chapter 1: An Introduction to Youth Sport

1.1 Introduction

Organized youth sport is one of the most popular organized leisure-time activities during adolescence (Kjønniksen et al., 2009). Reasons for participation include fun, fitness, competition, and an opportunity to socialize with like-minded peers. As the demand for youth sport programs has increased, the variety of athletic programming available has also expanded (Albrecht & Strand, 2010; Seefeldt & Ewing, 1997). Today there is a prevalence of club sport opportunities outside of school. Ideally, the objective of organized youth sport is to provide positive experiences for both participants and their parents (Albrecht & Strand, 2010). Sport should be a consistently fun and educating means to socialize and activate youth, while accommodating a pathway for those aspiring toward elite performance. The increase in opportunities for participation is great for communities but a simultaneous shift in the commercialization of the “youth sport” product has, at times, led to an exploitation of children’s desire to participate and excel, and parent’s willingness to pay for the service (or “the dream”) (Diaz, 2008). While the majority of sport programming is positive and constructive, participants increasingly identify negative experiences, largely noted by athletes and parents following their departure from the sport community. Participation and attrition rates alone expose a system that is failing (Burton & Martens, 1986; Wigger, 2001); “programs are not meeting the achievement needs of young athletes, pointing to major problems in the way youth sports are organized” (Burton & Martens, 1986, p. 184). And when the expanse of literature on youth sport experiences, and participant feedback from this study are also considered, a compelling argument materializes for programs to improve their service offerings (Docheff & Conn, 2004; Gould, 2009; Holt, Tamminen, Black, Sehn, & Wall, 2008).

Sport marketing is the promotion of interest in a team or event, the encouragement of participation, or the usage of sport to promote another product or service (O’Reilly & Séguin, 2009). Understanding consumption is a central objective of sport marketing (Stewart, Smith, & Nicholson, 2003) but the marketing of active participation is an understudied area of the

traditional sport marketing triad (Taks & Scheerder, 2006; Green & Chalip, 1997). “Children’s sport involvement has been virtually ignored” (Woolger & Power, 2000, p. 595) and the sport club phenomenon, in particular, is “complex and poorly understood” (Kirk & MacPhail, 2003, p. 24). To be competitive in the leisure market, sport organizations require a thorough understanding of participant behaviour and consumption, but this knowledge is limited (Taks & Scheerder, 2006; Côté, 1999). This study contributes to the field of sports marketing because it focuses not on the traditional aspects of sport like fandom, tourism, or merchandise (Taks & Scheerder, 2006), but rather on the early stages of sport participation. Its purpose is to clarify how clubs should attract and retain membership, through improved products and clearer communication. The study identifies gaps in delivery, in a burgeoning field that receives surprisingly little attention. The research contribution is an improved understanding of effective youth sport delivery through traditional marketing strategies; an area that has received little attention to date. Sports marketers recognize the power of the youth market, but only recently have they begun to see beyond ‘kids as fans’ and ‘kids as goods consumers,’ and now recognize ‘kids as participants’ (Taks & Scheerder, 2006, p.87).

Most, if not, all of us have had a dream of achieving athletic greatness with a game-saving touchdown, or raising a victorious hand following an Olympic sprint, or hitting a home run to win the World Series. Sport participation and spectatorship are deeply tied to our national and individual identity. Hockey played at the highest levels by professionals in the NHL may represent the pinnacle of achievement, but our culture is arguably defined by the youngsters who play on rinks around the country with only family and relatives as spectators and where coaches are volunteers. Sport holds considerable fascination for a community’s youth, because of its glamorization in the media, and the celebrity status of its premiere athletes. Because sport is highly valued in our culture, many parents believe that children should be exposed to organized sport at an early age (Seefeldt & Ewing, 1997; Woolger & Power, 2000). Hockey, soccer, baseball, football, swimming, tennis and other sports similarly benefit from the strong recreational youth leagues and clubs that are the foundation for lifelong participation and appreciation.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

This study is oriented around the phenomena of youth club sport in North America. Youth sport is delivered differently in Europe, as discussed later. And while there are many similarities, differences exist in communities across Canada and the USA. North American youth sport is typically a hybrid of public and private influences with the role of the private sector increasing. Conversely, European sport is almost exclusively a club-level responsibility, occurring outside of the school programming popular in Canada and the USA (e.g. 27,000,000 Germans participate in roughly 87,000 sport clubs) (Wigger, 2001). Fortunately there is considerable research on the European club sport system, which provides guidance for better understanding youth sport in North America.

Like any product or industry, youth club sport participation follows a life cycle, here young athletes are introduced to the sport, grow skills and commit more time to the pursuit mature and achieve peak performance and then eventually see their skills and participation levels decline. Similarly, sports move through lifecycles whereby they achieve maximum participation levels and their popularity begins to wane and overall involvement begins to decline. The goal of youth sport should be to develop a lifelong involvement with participants so that they extend participation beyond the highest levels of achievement to a more sustained for the remainder of their lives. In fact, one's tenure of participation can be extended beyond participant to include new and very different forms of involvement – coach, fundraiser, organizer, promoter and/or cheerleader.

As a result, increased attrition and/or an inability to maintain or grow new participant levels, jeopardizes the sustainability of sport clubs. From a club-level perspective the belief is that if sports clubs are more strategic and focused on the customer needs they will remain robust and sustainable. And from a more macro-societal level, if clubs lose athletes before they have fostered the requisite level of commitment, they may not only sever their ties to that particular sport, but potentially to an active lifestyle fundamental to long-term health. The current research seeks to identify how to sports clubs can better attract and satisfy the needs

of their target customer (child athletes and parents) to help them achieve their organizational goals. Interviews and focus groups will define how to reach that point.

To this point the literature has explored sport participation with regard to the socialization process and the negative consequences that can arise from sport participation. The literature has explored the advancement of youth sport in many regards; training methods, coaching skills, the influence of parents, and its social role. Other researchers have focused on how clubs are constructed, which includes relevant youth sport topics such as the targeting of particular consumers and expectations of participants (Barham, Broadway, Marchand, & Pestieau, 1997; Barth, 2002; Buchanan, 1965; Hayes & Slater, 2001). Club-related articles originate from a variety of different fields: economic articles focus on optimal participant numbers, leisure research examines customer expectations, and the marketing and hospitality literature discusses yield management and membership schemes. Each area contributes to a better understanding, but none adequately explores the challenges of youth club sport management. The pertinent question of how to improve the participant experience and ultimately ensure the sustainability of the youth club model remains unanswered.

Youth sport research has developed from a focus on history, toward socialization and positive health consequences, and then to its overt commercialization and competitiveness. Only recently is the field studying sport with an emphasis on management, while introducing concepts from other areas. For instance researchers are now examining the youth sports market with a management lens and calling for growth of the field (De Knop, Van Hoecke, De Bosscher, 2004; Kontos & Malina, 2003; Robinson, 2006; Scheerder, Taks, Vanreusel, & Renson, 2005; Kick & MacPhail, 2003; Taks & Scheerder, 2006). These articles discuss types of participation, marketing management, and practices such as segmentation, providing the foundational knowledge for this area. Yet, to date, there have been no research focused on a specific sport to deal with its unique challenges and opportunities. Indeed, it is argued that only sport-level analysis can provide any practical value to sports marketers.

De Knop, Van Hoecke, and De Bosscher (2004) contend that the sector's consumer expectations have evolved and that the industry is in need of greater professionalism to meet

those expectations. The viability of the industry demands customer satisfaction, which hinges on clearer segmentation and therefore greater differentiation amongst competitors.

“Segmentation analysis helps sports marketers to (re)position their services in the minds of these target groups to better meet their needs and wants, and to increase their market share by providing new benefits to attract non-users or neglected segments” (Taks & Scheerder, 2006, p. 117). The current thesis seeks to identify the heterogeneity of offerings within a specific market such that consumers select clubs which meet their individual needs. To do so, clubs must position themselves on their unique qualities (avoiding overlap and focusing on unmet needs) and effectively communicate those benefits to the right athlete audience.

Organizations should only target the segments that it can satisfy in a superior way (Taks & Scheerder, 2006). Successfully differentiating within the market encourages an improved alignment between the parent, athlete, coach and club. A common theme in the youth development literature argues for the importance of improved fit between the capacities of a community’s youth population and the assets for positive growth in that community (Lerner, Almerigi, Theokas, & Lerner, 2005). In the current context, it is argued that enhanced fit would have individuals selecting a club that best meets their desired level of competitiveness, budget, involvement and coaching-style. It also encourages future clubs to fill niche and emerging needs within the market. These changes benefit the athlete, parent, club, and simultaneously the community as a whole as more children enter sport programs, increasing pro-fitness behaviours while decreasing the consequences of sedentary behaviour.

To provide better sport programming for youth, it is necessary to understand the factors responsible for its current form; its history, the role participant’s play, and why the topic is even relevant. There is a lot of research on youth sport, much of which is discussed here and there is some literature exploring the sport participation service domain of marketing. And yet, there is very little examination of the servicing of youth club sport. This is surprising given that an entire industry has formed around the registration of children into sport programming. The extant literature on organized youth sport has focused on a wide variety of topics, such as: its history (Albrecht & Strand, 2010; Frankl, 2007; Scheerder, Taks, Vanreusel, & Renson, 2005), its

socialization function (Brustad, 1988; Dorsch, Smith, & McDonough, 2009; Jacobs, 2007; Seefeldt & Ewing, 1997), the performance and attrition of its participants (Capranica & Millard-Stafford, 2011; Côté, 1999; Gould, 2010; Rowland, 1998), sources of stress on health and maladaptation's (Brady, 2004; Martens, 1996; Wigger, 2001), the influence of family and in particular parents (Barnett, 2008; Coakley, 2006; Dukes & Coakley, 2002; Gould, Lauer, Roman, & Pierce, 2005; Hoyle & Leff, 1997; Wuerth, Lee, & Alfermann, 2004), demographic influences on participation (Barnett, 2008; Coakley, 2006; Kremarik, 2000) and its professionalization, privatization and commercialization (Brower, 1979; Coakley, 2010; Gould, 2009).

While each of these topics will be examined in greater detail in the sections that follow, it is only recently that the relationship between the club and its constituents (athletes, parents, coaches) been studied. And yet this relationship is critical to the experience, performance, and health of its participants and ultimately the sustainability of a given sports club. Given its infancy, research on the structure of clubs, membership types, and marketing practice is underdeveloped, leaving lingering questions. The remainder of this chapter reviews the literature contributing to the current conception of youth club sport as well as our understanding of its various participants (athlete, parent, and coach).

2.1 The Formalization of Organized Sport

Youth sport programming includes many organizations; publicly and privately-funded educational institutions, club-sport programming and teams, sport-medicine clinics, personal training programs (DiFiori, 2002), as well as, provincial and national sport organizations (PSO/NSO). The participants include the athletes, parents, coaches, program designers, administrators, and officials (Martin, Jackson, Richardson, & Weiller, 1999). Organized youth sports is characterized by a systematic participation schedule, participation directed by one or more adult leaders, and a substantial level of social commitment (Kjønniksen et al., 2009; Seefeldt, Ewing, & Walk, 1991). A subset of organized youth sport is competitive sport which is defined as any organized sport activity in which training and participation are time-consuming and in which the level of performance meets relatively high standards of expectations (Coakley,

1983). Youth Club Sport offers competitive sport opportunities that are framed by membership in a particular team.

The origins of North American club sport can be traced to the folk games, physical contests, and challenges of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, often featuring military skills like fencing and shooting (Gruneau, 2006). Its early form, celebrated human strength, flexibility, and endurance and acted as a forum for different parties to share their culture and ceremonies (Morrow & Wamsley, 2005). Sport transformed from passive activities and games to institutionalized, competitive contests in the late nineteenth century (Albrecht & Strand, 2010; Brady, 2004). The prominent advocate of sport during this period was the French Baron Pierre de Coubertin, who also founded the modern Olympic Games (Light & Lémonie, 2010,)), which he established as a means to counter the spiritual and moral decline of the industrial revolution (Beamish & Ritchie, 2004). Late nineteenth century sport clubs increased the availability of public activities for men, providing opportunities for controlled aggression and competition. Sport clubs created space for the celebration of male gender roles (Morrow & Wamsley, 2005), while simultaneously reinforcing the domestic role of middle-class women as they cared for their children while men played.

The early 1900s, was a tumultuous period as sports began to professionalize, and professional athletes were often stigmatized. Eventually the amateur-professional debate diffused, and professional leagues emerged creating economic opportunity through spectatorship and merchandising (Gruneau, 2006). The industrial revolution played a vital role in this transformation (Morrow & Wamsley, 2005) as increased economic prosperity meant that leisure pursuits were no longer the exclusive domain of the upper class (Frankl, 2007). Cultural shifts and innovation sculpted the new shape of sport with the completion of the inter-continental railway (connecting the country), the foundation of the YMCA and Boys and Girls Clubs (providing a platform to competitively participate in an organized sport), and specifically the creation of new competitive games, such as basketball (bringing athletes together in an easy to manage sport) (Seefeldt & Ewing, 1997). Culturally, Canada's large and growing immigrant population introduced fresh approaches to sport and the emergence of new sporting

organizations. These early variations of club sport established the tradition practiced today. Indeed many of the issues that emerged during the formative years of sport in North America continue to be a challenge for organized youth sport today: gender issues, financial barriers, and racial diversity.

2.1.1 The Evolution of Youth Sport

The early part of the twentieth century saw a rise in agency-sponsored sport and recreational activities, providing wholesome leisure opportunities initially designed to keep young boys out of trouble (Seefeldt & Ewing, 1997). A shift toward a more urbanized population and the industrial revolution's effective shortening of the work week, progressively led to greater participation (Frankl, 2007). Since 1954, opportunities to participate in youth sport transferred from agency sponsored programs provided by YMCAs/ YWCAs, and Boys and Girls Clubs to adult-organized programs (Seefeldt & Ewing, 1997; Frankl, 2007). These programs sought to socialize youth through a sport-centred experience. Coakley (2006) identified six factors that contributed to the rise of youth sport:

1. An increasing occurrence of single parent families and families with two working parents.
2. A popularizing perspective that children are best shaped solely through strategies that are purposively selected by the parent (such as club sport participation), rather than random external agents.
3. The long held belief that sport builds character.
4. A media-fuelled, parent-endorsed theory that the world outside the home is unsafe.
5. A general belief that boys will get into trouble if not occupied with a controlled activity such as sport.
6. An increase in visibility and reverence for athletes who are portrayed as heroes.

Following the 1970s, three main changes in youth sport occurred. The first was a trend toward a wider variety of activities, as tastes diverged. The secondly trend saw a wider age

range of participation, as older siblings were seen to have an influence on their younger siblings. Third, social divisions became progressively less pronounced, which enabled participation across traditional class boundaries. Frequently, modes of leisure are determined by education, but age, gender, and parent behaviour are also contributing factors (Scheerder, Taks, Vanreusel, & Renson, 2005).

Over the span of a century from the introduction to sport in the late 1800s as part of the philosophy of “Muscular Christianity,” through the establishment of formal programming (YMCA etc.), and then to the social changes of the 1970s, youth sport became firmly established as a cultural institution (Albrecht & Strand, 2010 p. 16; Frankl, 2007). Participation in organized youth sport rose dramatically (Woolger & Power, 2000, p. 595) in the 1980s as sports moved away from the publicly funded, community-centred youth sport programs requiring limited parental involvement and/or support (Dukes & Coakley, 2002, p. 185). The shift towards private, geographically-dispersed, costly, performance-based, and highly structured sport programs (Dukes & Coakley, 2002) ultimately systematized sport for Canada’s youth. This transformation was successful as parents quite literally “bought into” a new sport philosophy (Coakley, 2006; Marano, 2008). Parents purchase the sport experience and in many cases provide the necessary labour to provide the experience, but the children are the users and their experiences are different (Green & Chalip, 1997). Despite over 200 years of progress, declining participation rates indicate that today’s youth sport experience fails to meet participant expectations (Active Healthy Kids, 2008).

To this end, there are three distinct participants involved in youth organized sport today – the child athlete, parents, and coaches – with considerable likelihood that the club sport coach is or was at some point a parent of a club sport participant. Each stakeholder has unique and often competing views on what a positive sport experience should be, how success is defined, and how the club should be managed. Young athletes want to have fun, play games, and emulate their athletic heroes. Parents and coaches hold different aspirations, which may or may not be in conflict with each other and with the athletes’. For instance parents might expect specific results from their child, while a coach might focus on producing a winning team.

Parents often experience considerable pressure while in the youth sport system, as their self-worth may become unfortunately tied to their child's performance (Gould, 2009). This situation arises and is perpetuated by increasing expectations, fuelled by the notion that medals, trophies, statistics, and wins define success, rather than the development of skills and increasing appreciation for a game (Gould, 2009). Sport is a profoundly emotional environment for parents, who in one instance describe feelings of pride and enjoyment in their child's participation and in another, exhibit feelings of guilt, exhaustion, and resentment (of oneself and the youth sport context) (Dorsch et al., 2009, p. 455). As sport has become increasingly commercialized, the most identifiable features of the product have become performance and success, the parent "consumer" have begun to measure product value and personal status through the achievements of their child (Marano, 2008). It is not difficult to see how a well-intentioned parent becomes immersed in this world (Martin, Jackson, Richardson, & Weiler, 1999). For instance, Lally and Kerr (2008, p.51) showed that parents can be "subtly encultured" into elite sport, where immense sacrifice is standard. As their child progresses through a school season in the sport (likely lasting 4 months), they desire to continue at a club level (lasting another 5 months). If the athlete wants to remain competitive for the next season, they must aim to make a provincial team (lasting 2-3 months) or enrol in summer clinics. This is further endemic in sports that require a high degree of technical or aerobic training. Power and Woolger (2000, p. 604) note that parents respond to their child's success and growing enthusiasm by devoting higher levels of involvement. Before a parent realizes, their child is a single-sport, full-time athlete. Consistent pressure to prepare for a future opportunity leaves few options. Upon investing so much in the pursuit and having stretched themselves so thin, parents may feel trapped and transfer pressure onto their children to perform, in order to justify the sacrifices incurred. The time, cost, and emotional commitment can become a tool of leverage against the child to push for greater devotion and performance (Frankl, 2006). Too often, parents find themselves overwhelmed by a system that does not allow a lot of negotiation or questioning and they are further hesitant to do so because they are likely new to the environment. Devout commitment is not necessarily flawed if the child is having fun,

avoiding injury, and internally motivated, and so long as the parent does not burn out, is financially capable, and is acting exclusively as a supportive facilitator.

Caught between a variety of competing influences and motivations, young athletes often find themselves in the uncomfortable position as “pawns in an adult ego struggle” (Brower, 1979, p. 43). Each stakeholder engages with the club differently and has a different perception of what the club represents, that causes ambiguity and conflicting agendas. The situation is further complicated when some individuals assume multiple positions, such as coach, volunteer, parent, and administrator (Kirk & MacPhail, 2003). Clearly, youth sport clubs are more than just a facility where youth come to learn athletic skills. They are social institutions with multiple purposes, some official and explicit (such as talent acquisition), while others unofficial but generally understood (such as padding a coach’s CV).

2.2 The Sport Club

The literature on the youth sport club is limited, and what exists draws upon concepts from other fields, like leisure studies and economics. A club is a voluntary group of individuals who derive collective benefit by contributing toward “production costs, the members’ characteristics, or a good characterized by excludable benefit” (Cornes & Sandler, 1986, p. 159). Kirk and MacPhail (2003, p. 24) suggest that the “phenomenon of the sports club is at the same time ubiquitous, complex, and poorly understood.” Jaramilo et al. (2003) argued that clubs, be they sport or otherwise, make an important voluntary contribution in time and money to communities. Moreover, clubs are dynamic organisms, because of the change in people who volunteer and are hired to manage, maintain and sustain it, a fact driven by its reliance on passionate adults, whose changing desires can significantly shift the club’s direction over time. Often the adults guiding the children’s experience have minimal or no professional background to draw upon (Martens, 1996). Divergent philosophies within the club’s membership and leadership create opportunities for both growth and conflict. In fact, because club missions and objectives are less clear than that of conventional businesses or non-profit organizations, and are frequently run by “green” parent-volunteers, club management is unique from most other organizations. Ultimately, each sport club should share a common mission - to use sport to

promote its young athletes' self-worth, create fun experiences, and instil values of autonomy and independence (Martens, 1996, p.309). This mission, however virtuous fails to capture the unique competitive realities faced by most sport clubs – the ambitions of the parent volunteers and the professional coaches whose egos and aspirations often guide the direction of a given club.

Most research on youth sport appears to originate in Europe, particularly Belgium, Sweden, Finland, and Germany and focuses on club level theory and broad participation. In contrast, North American youth sport research tends to focus on behavioural and participation tendencies of the individual athlete. This difference in research focus likely reflects the relative nascence of club sport in North America versus Europe, a difference particularly evident in the U.S. where sport is primarily delivered through the school system (Wigger, 2001; Yang, Telama, & Laakso, 1996). The European system favours the club model, and physical education in school often occurs just once per week. The North American system more frequently creates competitive opportunities for sport through the school system. And, on both continents, the daily school schedule accommodates these respective approaches. In North America though, fewer parents trust school-directed sport programs to provide adequate development, and are leading the shift to outside programs (Frankl, 2007).

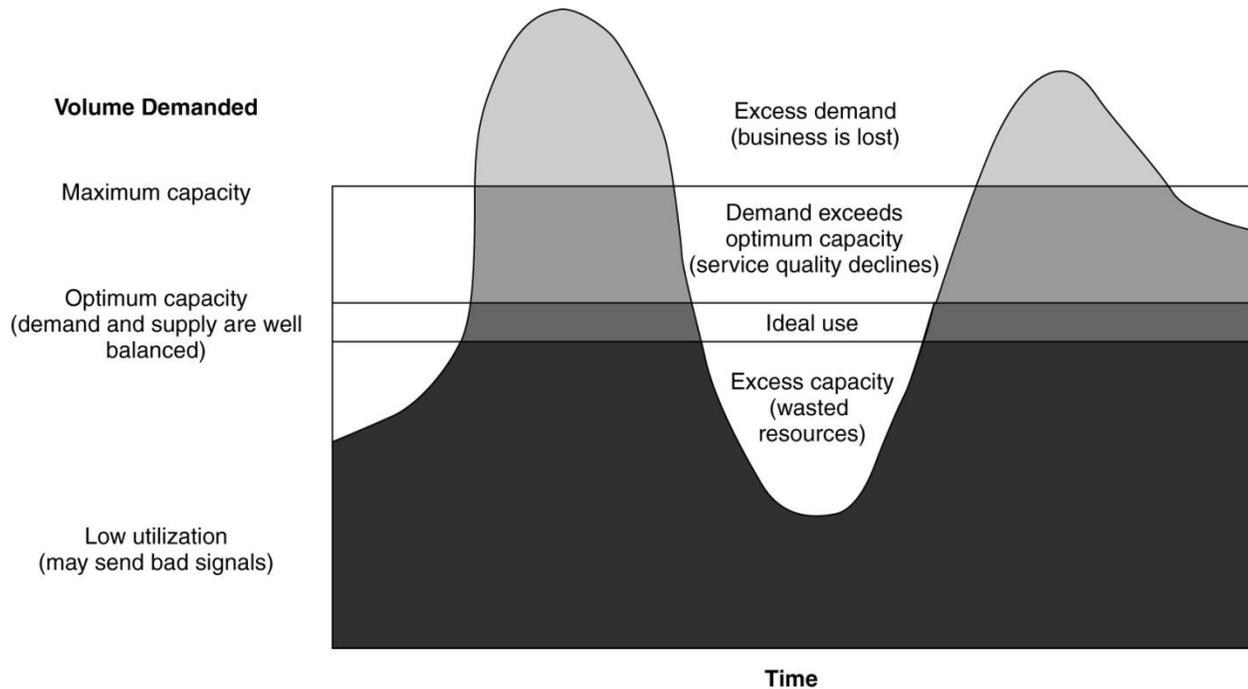
Sport clubs have served to divide or segment competitors in the sport community since the origins of modern sport (Hargreaves, 1986). For instance, it is not uncommon for competitive clubs to cater to children as young as five in the sports of gymnastics, t-ball, soccer and swimming (Woolger & Power, 2000). As Great Britain's sport system demonstrates, national governing bodies for sport increasingly use the club sport framework to identify talent and establish performance development strategies. Although, clubs have cultivated and developed elite talent for roughly 40 years, the formalization of the relationship (between clubs, the national sport organizations, the athletes, and other stakeholders focused on sport performance) has increased markedly in recent years (Kirk & MacPhail, 2003). In Canada, this development is guided by the Long Term Athlete Development model (LTAD), a federal government initiative which identifies a pathway to performance and the concept of 'sport for

life' (Canadian Sport Centres, 2010). The LTAD was created by a group of sport leaders in the mid 2000's as a strategy to guide athlete development and address many of the obstacles that plagued the extant development system.

Each club delivers a certain service that can be viewed as a trade-off between membership/participant cost and the calibre of performance coaching. This balance of cost and performance sees clubs along a continuum from low cost clubs that attract large volumes of "athletes" as possible (i.e., at or even well-above capacity) with next to no individualized attention and little chance of producing elite athletes to those programs that are very expensive, are highly selective and that offer the kind of athlete-specific training required for elite athlete development. This trade-off suggests that membership utility is dependent upon the number of individuals with whom the athlete must share club assets (e.g., coach attention, training time). If a club's sole focus is revenue generation (which likely is not conducive to establishing competitive athletes or the overall quality of the experience), then a focus on family type, price, demand and capacity is required (Barth, 2002). From a purely economic theory approach a club might choose to focus on "membership margin," as more members help offset more overhead and thus increase club profitability or at least increase chance of survival. From the athlete's perspective, the incentive to join such a club is not social, but rather a balance of cost and consumption factors as such clubs will offer lower membership costs (Buchanan, 1965, p. 2). It is fair to assume that clubs do not favour this approach, as it alienates members. Balancing capacity and demand to optimize a club's purpose is a common obstacle in services marketing, and is particularly relevant to club sports such as swim clubs that rent or operate facilities which are expensive and suffer from cyclical demand each day (see Figure 2.1)

Although most families are not free spending rarely is bargain hunting for a sport club their primary decision-criteria. In family situations where cost is a prime motivation, publicly-funded programs such as the YMCA are better suited to meet athlete needs than a private club. Given that most clubs are not for-profit businesses in the traditional sense, there is little incentive on the part of its board of directors to grow earnings, anyway. Nevertheless, each club will position itself at a particular price point, and attempt to offer a corresponding product.

Figure 2.1 Variations in Demand Relative to Capacity (Lovelock, 1994, p. 241)



to suit its target market. A club must be sustainable, but it also must ensure that it utilizes its income responsibly and effectively to encourage development in its members and satisfy the paying consumer – the athletes parents. In reality, there are many dimensions upon which families evaluate club membership beyond the two most obvious of cost and performance.

2.3 Club Sport Culture

Club sport is organized sport that engages training and competitive opportunities, in a highly structured, time consuming manner with performance a central focus (Coakley, 1983). Clubs are social institutions whose meaning is derived from the official and unofficial agendas of its membership, and that is the public representation of its athletes, coaches, and parents values (Kirk & MacPhail, 2003). The athlete, parent, and coach shape the child’s participation patterns, but the club with its own ethos built on its history, tradition, and unique orientation similarly influence the athlete’s experience. Beyond places that teach the intricacies of a sport, clubs create “complex social worlds” where “children experience important physical, social, and

personal development” (Light & Lémonie, 2010, p.33). In other contexts, from informal reading groups to yoga studios, clubs evolve into a form that best satisfies its users, which then attracts more like-minded individuals that establishes the homogeneity of the group. As each parent encourages a particular athletic pathway for their child, and as each coach offers a specific skill in educating and training an athlete, each club creates a unique environment catering to a specific set of consumer expectations.

For those responsible for promoting a specific youth sport club, the value in understanding this relationship is an improved means to reach ideal members (Barnett, 2008). Sport clubs compete with each other for access to sport-oriented consumers. Unlike traditional leisure structures, youth can transfer between activities with little resistance, adding retention to the attraction membership development challenge that clubs (De Knop et al., 2004). According to Dukes and Coakley (2002), private youth sport programming has become especially popular today because parents view it as providing many of the same developmental functions historically delivered by private schools. Indeed, many youth sport opportunities are made financially viable because of the volunteer time invested by parents and coaches. Research supports the notion that these adults most often volunteer with good intention, devoting their time, energy, and skills, to create a safe, well-instructed, and fun experience (Frankl, 2006). The behaviours, views, and results youth garner from sport are influenced by adults as they are heavily involved during the early stages (Kontos & Malina, 2003). In Canada, sport clubs are often subsidized by the government as they are provided access to municipally run facilities funded by provincial and federal grants (Light & Lémonie, 2010).

The focus of this study is competitive sport, but the club landscape includes many levels beyond the performance oriented. Jacobs (2007), for instance identified three levels of sport involvement: sports as fun, sports as moderate competition, and sports as high competition, and youth athletes and their families can transition between levels throughout their lifetime as involvement. In ‘sports as fun,’ parents are typically involved due to necessity in roles such as coach, a scene that takes place often at YMCA’s. Kids define fun at this stage as the opportunity to meet new friends, learn a skill, relax, and have fun playing the sport. Parents in this setting

do not enforce involvement, but encourage it should the child indicate interest. The YMCA experience is a cornerstone to many young children's sport experience. YMCAs act as low barrier outlet for kids to participate in sport and as a springboard to higher levels of competitiveness. Although the YMCA might represent the least competitive form of sport club, there are summer and winter sport clubs that similarly eschew the 'sport as fun' model. Indeed, parents of athletes enrolled in recreational and seasonal sport clubs will sometimes single out highly competitive parents as "excessive" and "over-involved" (Jacobs, 2007), underscoring how poorly matched athlete-coach-parent-club expectations can lead to sub-optimal club experiences.

Within 'sports as moderate competition,' families prefer their child has fun while enjoying the opportunity to compete. This environment is a mixed approach where competition is valued, but there is still a desire to offer equitable participation rates (e.g., playing time) to allow for equal access to skill development. In 'sport as high competition' clubs, fun is replaced by the drive for improved skills and performance in a competitive environment takes precedence. In these some instances, parents and children share a degree of the same resentment toward team mates with a 'sports as fun' attitude viewing them as an impediment to competition. Naturally at this level, families demonstrate a greater commitment to the sport. Parents and coaches at this level, direct the child's play toward a performance-orientation. It is not atypical, at this level for parents to incur thousands of dollars in expenses for team fees, equipment, and travel. Whether the goal is to get an athletic scholarship or to reach the Olympics, parents at this level expressed support and encouragement in pursuit of elite performance dreams (Jacobs, 2007).

A consideration, above parental expectations, financial limitations, and coaching pressure, must be that the child- athlete is having fun. That aspiration may appear idealistic or naïve though as it does not take into account that each athlete has an internal drive to participate at a specific level in sport and to reach a particular dream, including elite aspirations where sacrifices are immense. So, although sport must be fun, it must also recognize that the definition of fun varies amongst participants. To deliver on this objective then, sport must

provide an array of products to insure that it satisfies the different needs or definitions of “fun,” that participants have.

2.3.1 Club Selection

Identifying and joining a club is sometimes an arduous process for the parent and child. The parent or child, or both, evaluate many options, recognizing the choice is of consequence to the experience and future achievement. Information is gathered and compared from many sources. Findings suggest that word of mouth is the most influential source of expectations (Robeldo 2001). Word of mouth communication amongst friends, family members, co-workers and other sources permits families to develop insights into and set expectations for the service they are considering (Robinson 2006). In a study of young French athletes, three factors influenced the decision to join a sport club: a desire to improve, influence from one’s family, and a positive attitude toward sport in general.

The image, branding, and price communicated by a club makes implied promises about the quality, value, reliability, and reputation that the club engenders (Robinson 2006). While price is a key influencer of expectations as it suggests the level of quality (Robinson 2006), however the true cost of club sport participation may not be clear at the outset, and thus difficult for consumers to select the most suitable club. Robinson (2006) explains that using price as an evaluative tool may be problematic for not-for-profit organizations, where public funding has a varying influence on different clubs, thereby distorting an accurate reflection of the market. Voluntary organizations are bounded by the fees that their members are willing to tolerate and as such, may not adequately reflect the quality of the service provided. While evaluating options, consumers will also take into account the way club size will influence their enjoyment in terms of congestion, and the effect that membership size has on voluntary contributions (Barham, Broadway, Marchand and Pestieau 1997).

2.4 Commercialized Youth Sport

The sport industry is now the 10th largest in Canada and is influenced considerably by the consumption patterns of children and youth (Stevens, Lathrop & Bradish 2005, Government

of Canada 1998), and its significance at the club level from junior hockey to t-ball is remarkable. Participation in organized sport entails a complex third party purchaser agreement where parents attempt to fit their child with the best program possible. That club membership is a novel purchase distinguished by three factors. The first is that spending on sport activities is discretionary. Secondly, sport is usually participated in during leisure time, and third and likely most notably, there is a high degree of emotional attachment (Robinson, 2006).

The privatization and commercialization of youth sport is responsible for the “normalization” of year-round, sport-specific programming for an increasing number and increasingly younger number of youth (Coakley, 2010 p 16). Profitable programs created by a new breed of entrepreneurs have emerged capitalizing on eager, well-meaning parents. For many coaches, the progress of the club and its athletes has presented new career options and provided sizeable income. A combination of performance pressures and the opportunity for increased income for coaches has shaped youth sport such that longer seasons, expanded practices, increased travel and a more competitive focus has become the norm.

The professionalization and privatization of youth club sport is a popular topic in sport literature discussed first by Brower (1979), and subsequently by other researchers (Coakley, 2010; Gould, 2009). The professionalization and privatization of youth sport are commonly misunderstood concepts. Privatization or commercialization refers to a cultural shift in how children consume sport experiences; gradually these experiences less often take place in schools or public-spheres and more often in a private setting. As discussed previously, privatization emerged as a result of cultural shifts in the 1970s (Scheerder, Taks, Vanreusel, & Renson, 2005) and 1980s (Coakley, 2010). This shift is witnessed by an increase in sport opportunities for children encouraging higher levels of performance at increasingly younger ages, for parents to fund these performances, and for coaches to create the sport-specific training to achieve it. In turn, the commercialization of youth sport lead to more professional expectations of young athletes, as it incentives emerged to push young athletes to achieve higher levels sooner.

However, professionalization not only refers to a move toward improved management or best practices (i.e., professionalization of the industry), it also refers to an expectation of professional behaviour amongst athletes (professionalization of participants). According to Brower (1979) professionalism is the extent of seriousness placed on the activity by its participants, and within the sphere of youth sport, this position has trickled down from professional leagues, to collegiate sport, to high school sport, and now to youth (Gould, 2009). To this end, two divergent views regarding the professionalism of sport can be found in the literature. The sport socialization view generally argues for less professionalism in terms of expectations on youth, while the sport management view argues for greater professionalism in terms of a more customer-oriented experience. This study and others (De Knop et al., 2004) advocate for increased industry professionalism, so that participants partake in sport at a level they enjoy and is long-lasting.

Considerable literature has focused on the consequences that have resulted from the formalization of youth sport's service offerings. Frankl (2007, p. 3) refers to this shift as a, "70 year loss of innocence." Participation in sport is now a rite of passage for youth (Seefeldt & Ewing, 1997), and combined with over-parenting, it is clear that sport is a different experience for children than in the past. As Marano (2004, p. 20) described it:

In the house that child raising has become, play is all but dead.... And what play there is has been corrupted. The organized sports many kids participate in are managed by adults; difficulties that arise are not worked out by kids but adjudicated by adult referees.

Economic incentive underlies this shift: the draft in professional league sports, the detailed performance analysis of professional athletes, and gambling, among other factors serve to pressurize the youth sport experience. While the economics are of course different, relative to the professional (or "adult") sport setting with professional sports responsible to the audience, youth sport is ideally limited to personal development and experience (Brower, 1979). In the youth setting, athletes are obviously not paid by performance, and rarely have contracts (with some exceptions), but the desire to succeed is just as deeply felt for a young

athlete as it is a professional – a by-product of injecting competitiveness into the earliest stages of involvement. The youth sport framework, almost universally, provides the pretext for future education, wealth, and potential stardom. Indeed, youth marketing has evolved exponentially such that numerous companies focus on delivering brands to youth, as aggressively and early as possible (fusemarketing.com, youthsportsmarketing.com, dugoutmedia.com). The emergence of these services shows there is value in devising club level plans to introduce specific consumers to specific product offerings.

A common goal for parents with children engaged in highly competitive sports is that their child work to earn an athletic scholarship (Jacobs, 2007). This objective usually manifests too early, when focus should be on health and social competence (Wigger, 2001). Instances like this reveal how the sport system has become misguided, overly competitive, and potentially harmful. It has evolved through a unique mix of parental pressure, professionalization of coaches, and society's general trend toward excellence at earlier stages in life. Marano (2008, p. 1):

No one doubts that there are significant economic forces pushing parents to invest so heavily in their children's outcome from an early age. But taking all the discomfort, disappointment and even the play out of development, especially while increasing pressure for success, turns out to be misguided by just about 180 degrees.

This focus on competitive achievement places tremendous pressure on the family. For instance, an increasing need, for support, in the form of transportation, equipment, coaching, and nutrition burdens a traditional family dynamic. Indeed, Lee and MacLean (1997) suggested that ongoing athlete-centeredness may be detrimental to the overall health of the family. However, there are athletes (and families) for whom a highly demanding program is suitable at a young age (obviously as many successful athletes emerge from these programs). However, these success stories are not sufficient reason to expose all children to this structure, but rather only those with the internal motivation, capacity and support to do so. The long term consequences are significant and particularly evident in swimming, gymnastics, hockey and

football. The question that must be asked is what happens to the children who fail to obtain the athletic scholarship, or “make it” to the highest stage? For instance, what happens to the child with multiple concussions, bad knees, or the child who has “bulked up” to play a position and now has to deal with weight management issues?

Sport has evolved to a point where considerable sacrifice is needed to progress. Without this, elite success is unlikely. Canada’s aforementioned LTAD model is the leading document framing the correct approach to youth sport with consideration to physiological, emotional, and mental factors (discussed later), but has inconsistent ‘buy-in’ across sports and communities (only one club made reference to the LTAD in this study). Professionalization in itself, may not be counter-productive, should its focus remain distinct from the adult professional sport setting. A professional youth sport environment, whose platform balances elite performance with skill development, injury-prevention, and genuine fun, seems ideal. However, the philosophy currently appears to be more often focused on professionalization of a different nature. Despite the obvious pitfalls of this approach, the performance of athletes in good programs illustrates the value of highly systematized training programs and the demand for them. If only that nature of professionalization was universally delivered, young athletes could reflect on great experiences. Such performances are the result of a successful youth sport system, but not because of a system that mimics the adult professional model. Professionalism at the youth level means that a program is delivered consistently and “as advertised” in terms of cost, competitiveness, coaching style, and so on.

2.5 Socialization through Organized Youth Sport

While some authors focus on the consequences of an increasingly commercialized sport landscape, a number of researchers are focused on participation from a sociological perspective (Albrecht & Strand, 2010; Kontos & Malina, 2003; Scheerder et al., 2005; Seefeldt & Ewing, 1997). Socialization is the ongoing process by which an individual develops their identity while acquiring the requisite norms, values, and social skills for their social context (Arnett, 1995). Sports provide educational opportunities for character development because many of the social

and moral behaviours practiced are similar to those expected by society more broadly (Light & Lémonie, 2010; Seefeldt & Ewing, 1997).

In addition, sport involvement develops a variety of life skills: social interaction that underscores socially desirable behaviour, positive values ingrained in fair play and work ethic, and an emphasis on teamwork and commitment (Holt, Tamminen, Tink, & Black, 2009; Zimmerman, Bingenheimer, & Notaro, 2002). As proof, sport participants report higher self-esteem in contrast to non-sport participants (Feltcher, Nickerson, & Wright, 2003), which is especially true in team sports where greater time devoted to sport correlates with higher perceived abilities, and a concomitant rise in self-esteem (Slutzky & Simpkins, 2009).

Numerous articles document the physical, social, academic, and psychological benefits that this extracurricular activity offers (Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2005; Larson, Hansen, & Moneta, 2006; Barber, Stone, Hunt, & Eccles, 2005; Wiersma & Fifer, 2008; Seefeldt & Ewing, 1997; Wigger, 2001). These studies and others reinforce the fact that sport provides an opportunity to acquire life skills by creating circumstances to practice emotional regulation, develop non-academic proficiencies and build relationships (Holt et al., 2008; Larson, 2000). Research shows that athletes who remained in sport for longer periods spoke of their clubs' developmental philosophies, highlighting the influence of sport (Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2008). Beyond character development, sport is praised for both its direct and lifelong health benefits, particularly for combating childhood obesity and its ability to dissuade risky behaviours, such as drug use (Kremerik, 2000; Hasted, Segrave, Pangrazi, & Petersen, 1984; Wigger, 2001). Sport participation also engenders a respect for rules, opponents, team work, and fairness (Rutten, Stams, Biesta, Schuengel, Dirks, & Hoeksma, 2006).

2.6 The Youth Athlete

The "youth" title in sport has a variety of definitions, ranging from as low as five to as high as 35. For this study, "youth" athletes are those between five and 18 years of age. Sport is extremely popular across youth populations, which is not surprising, given the fun, physical benefit, and reward opportunities it offers coupled with the reverence elite athletes receive.

Despite this, consequences of inactivity like obesity and diabetes are rising, reflecting failure in the way sport is offered. In 2008 USA, roughly 44 million boys and girls participated in organized youth sport (Albrecht & Strand, 2010). Another finding notes that 55-60% of American children under the age of 16 participate in extracurricular sport activity (Frankl, 2007). Over 200,000 households are members of USA Swimming alone (Dukes & Coakley, 2002). In Australia, 1.7 million of 2.7 million children aged 5-14 took part in organized sport outside of school in 2006 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009). Swimming alone had a participation rate of 17%, equating to 500,000 swimmers. And as of 1998, approximately 54% of Canadian children aged 5 – 14, or 2.2 million youth athletes, participated in some form of organized sport (Kremerik, 2000). Soccer is the most popular amongst this age group, with 31% of children actively participating. Swimming and hockey are not far behind, each at 24% (Kremerik, 2000). Across three distinct and developed nations, sport participation is a valued pursuit.

2.6.1 Cost

Affordability is a strong predictor of the type and breadth of extracurricular activity that a child participates in. For instance, the parent's socioeconomic stature, defined by income, education, and occupation, has a significant influence on a child's sport preferences (Yang, Telama, & Laakso, 1996). The number of children in a family may also contribute to activity-choices, because as the availability of a family's discretionary income decreases there will be a concomitant decrease in opportunities for the children to participate in extracurricular activities (Barnett, 2008). Research on the relationship between cost and participation has revealed that just 49% of children from families with household incomes below \$40,000 are active in sport, which is in contrast to the 73% of households with incomes above \$80,000 (Kremerik, 2000). Children in lower income families are also found to be more likely to participate in less costly sports such as baseball, whereas the children from more wealthy households tend to participate in sports such as downhill skiing and swimming (Kremerik, 2000).

Interestingly, a higher household income is predictive of participation in a greater number of extracurricular activities, but not of the total time devoted (Barnett, 2008). This may

explain why a number of less advantaged youth progress to elite levels in sport, despite their obvious handicap from the start. A greater commitment to fewer pursuits, rather than an array of activities builds a foundation for success. Finally, Barnett (2008) notes that a number of sports are prohibitive to certain segments of society due to the cost involved. Sports like athletics and football are generally more affordable (especially outside of North America). There are exceptions; subsidisation programs make skiing accessible to the masses in some communities and conversely, team fees to play for top football clubs in Canada are exclusionary.

Highly competitive sport families can expect to spend \$10,000 to \$40,000 per year on team fees, equipment, special coaching, travel, and so on (Jacobs, 2007; Coakley, 2006; Fallon, 2012). Sadly, sport in general and competitive sport particularly, is elitist. In the article titled *Gabby Douglas, Ryan Lochte: Why Families of American's Olympics Athletes Are Broke*, Fallon (2012, p.1) noted that "the financial strain their (child's) years of training put on their family indicates that investing in a future Olympian may not always be a financially sound decision." This hunger for performance leads to increasingly privatized and expensive programming, as many hopeful, and desperate parents fuel demand (Coakley, 2006).

2.6.2 Gender

Boys and girls enter sport for different reasons, some of which are imposed by cultural norms, while others relate to demeanour variations unique to one's sex. From birth, children learn how society treats boys and girls and what its expectations of and for them are. A number of "activities, opportunities, encouragements, discouragements, overt behaviors, covert suggestions, and various forms of guidance," socialize children toward a publicly acceptable definition of their gender (Witt, 1997, p. 254). Boys and girls experience sport differently and often boys' tend to be socialized to fit an athletic persona while girls are often socialized away from the aggressive, physical, and leadership-oriented behaviours common in sport (Kontos & Malina, 2003). Parents often persuade athletes toward *sex-typed* activities; doll playing for girls and sports activities for boys (Eccles, Jacobs, & Harold, 1990). Gender segregation of activities, different toys and play partners and the resultant themes emerging in play, along with

interactions with adults will all ultimately affect a child's athletic aspirations (Barnett, 2008; Messner, 1990). For instance, boys are more often encouraged by their parents to participate in competitive sports than are girls and, as a result, remain active in competitive sports longer than do girls. Opportunities to participate in sport have expanded significantly, but a gender imbalance remains with girls and young women accounting for just 39% of interscholastic athletic participation (Seefeldt & Ewing, 1997). While opportunities for boys are more common, it also appears that boys are more often judged on their competitive sport ability than girls (Messner, 1990; Eaton, 1975), which demonstrates why boys form conditional definitions of self-worth based on performance (Messner, 1990).

While boys and girls, aged 6 - 11, tend to commit to a comparable number of activities, and devote a similar amount of time (Jacobs, Vernon, & Eccles, 2005), young boys consistently demonstrate a greater affinity for team sport through childhood and adolescence (Barber et al., 2005). Barnett (2008) also found that males demonstrate greater participation in team sports than their female counterparts. Regardless, there are few differences between girls and boys with respect to positive or negative outcomes from sport which suggests that despite differences in sport activities each gender derives similar satisfaction from his or her athletic experience (Brustad, 1988).

Prosocial behaviour is more frequently demonstrated by female athletes, supporting research that finds higher level of moral reasoning in females versus male counterparts, lower acceptance of unsportsmanlike play, and a less favourable view of injurious acts as a tolerable component of sport (Kavussanu & Roberts, 2001). Using the Achievement Goal Scale for Youth Sports, girls demonstrated higher mastery scores than boys, while boys had higher ego orientated scores (Smith, Smoll, & Cumming, 2009). A promising development in sport has been the emergence of female role models, the most obvious in North America being the USA soccer team, who through their success found a medium to show girls that one can remain feminine while pursuing sport (Kontos & Malina, 2003). The introduction of women's boxing into the 2012 Summer Olympic Games and women's ski jump into the 2014 Winter Olympic Games supports this trend.

2.7 The Parent

Parents fulfill a functional role with duties like paying team fees, fundraising, driving to practices and competitions, and maintaining equipment (Dukes & Coakley, 2002, p. 185; Woolger & Power, 2000). In addition, parents serve a vital motivational role in encouraging effort, developing a sense of belonging and self-esteem, and in helping the young athlete cope with the difficult emotions that accompany failure (Power & Woolger, 1994). Prior to the teen years, virtually all responsibilities that enable participation in youth sport are managed by the parents (Barnett, 2008). Parental involvement typically decreases as the young athlete reaches the developmental stage, but then remains stable into the later career phases (Wuerth et al., 2004). Parents who take the time to structure youth sport experiences for their child(ren), do so with the intent to maximize benefit with regard to what they perceive as important outcomes (Shaw & Dawson, 2001).

Active children are generally found to have supportive and active families – almost two-thirds in a 1998 survey had at least one parent also involved in organized sport, while only about a quarter of inactive kids had parents who were involved in sport (Kremerik, 2000). Parents who play(ed) sports often incorporate it into the lives of their children such that it is a natural extension of everyday life (Gould, Lauer, Roman, & Marguerite, 2005). In households where neither parent has a history of organized sport involvement, just 36% of their kids were active (Kremerik, 2000; Eriksson, Nordqvist, & Rasmussen, 2008).

Most research on parents of sporting children focuses on either their positive influence in facilitating participation or their over-involvement (Barnett, 2008; Woolger & Power, 2000; Dukes & Coakley, 2002). While interesting, these findings fail to capture the complexity of the purchase decision that parents make when registering their child for a team, as it is ultimately their (mis)understanding and due diligence surrounding this decision that will dictate their perceptions of and satisfaction with the child's club experience. At this point, research has determined that parents encourage or prevent sport participation, and that very often, parents, though well intentioned, intrude upon their child's experience (the stereotypical hockey mom is more than a myth) too often rushing their child's exposure to formal sport (Seefeldt & Ewing,

1997 p 10). The media is filled with examples of misguided sport parents and their extreme behaviours in support of their children: manipulating birth records, abuse of officials, the use of performance enhancing drugs, and the subversion of academic opportunities (Gould, 2009).

Docheff and Conn (2004) identified the following as contributing factors for anti-social behaviour on the part of sport parents:

1. Vicarious achievement through the child
2. Visions of super-stardom
3. Securing a college scholarship
4. Family values
5. Professional-sport role models
6. Win-at-all-cost attitude

Further, Brower (1979) suggested that many parents are sport fanatics, who vicariously and aggressively live out personal athletic fantasies through their children, as they are or were unable to do so in their own personal sport experience. Rowland (1997) referred to this type of vicarious consumption as 'achievement by proxy' as parents often adopt expectations for their child's performance, and blame themselves if the goal is not achieved and often expecting praise if it is (Coakley, 2006). Too commonly in youth sport today, parents and coaches define their moral worth, via the performances of their young athletes. This phenomenon reflects society's broader outcome-oriented pursuit of happiness. All too often, these misplaced aspirations often have deleterious effects for the child athlete who leave the sport experience injured, depressed, or lost; far from the original intent of everyone's effort.

Extreme parental behaviour in support of sport, from the merely disruptive and misguided to destructive and even criminal, is well-documented from parents rearranging their lives for their child, to parents sabotaging their child's opponent (Gould, Lauer, Roman, & Pierce, 2005). Indeed many clubs now publish a rule book for parents to encourage pro-social

behaviour (Appendix A). Parents are highly committed to their child's success because they may be the child's first coach, or have been athletes in their past (Wuerth et al., 2004).

What has yet to be understood is the mechanism by which parents establish a relationship with a club and how they determine its appropriateness for their sons or daughters. It is obvious that today's parents care deeply about their child's sport experience, and they have expectations that a club should speak to when recruiting new members. The depth of attachment parents devote to their child's participation creates opportunities for clubs to segment and target parents who share those same values. For as extant research shows, parents not only benefit from the "vicarious involvement" afforded by their child's participation, but also the social opportunities that arise. To that end, Wiersma and Fifer (2008) identified the following sources of parental pleasure:

1. Parental Satisfaction

- Observing child enjoyment
- Observing and learning sport
- Observing success
- Observing child play
- Encouraging child

2. Interaction Opportunities

- Within a community
- Spending time with child

Parents report that their child's involvement in competitive sport is accompanied by a personal increase in attendance at events as well as consumption through reading and television demonstrating a shift in "belief, behaviour, and commitment" (Jacobs, 2007 p. 29). This lifestyle change occurs in conjunction with the significant time and financial investment parents make in the initial stages of involvement, indeed it is not uncommon for family lives to revolve around the needs of the child-athlete (Côté, 1999). Parents also identify emotional (pride and enjoyment, anxiety and embarrassment, guilt and exhaustion) and cognitive (game or sport knowledge, awareness, goals etc.) changes as a result of their child's participation in

sport (Snyder & Purdy, 1982; Dorsch et al., 2009). Organized sport is important to parents as it is relatively unique insofar as: a) it affords parents a visible activity that they take part in child, and b) it is a form of progressive skill development whereby parents are able to compare their child to his or her peers (Dukes & Coakley, 2002 p. 194). Children who achieve success in sport may change the lifestyles of their parents (Yang et al. 1996; Snyder & Purdy, 1982), with incentives for performance such as financial gain, social status, and scholarships often driving parents unwittingly adopting a “whatever it takes” attitude with regard to their child’s performance (Dorsch, 2009).

2.8 The Coach

Coaches play a central role in the delivery of youth sport, creating a safe and effective training environment (Kontos & Malina, 2003) and the quality of the youth sport experience is dependent upon capable club leadership that is primarily dependent on the coach (Seefeldt & Ewing, 1997). Smith, Smoll, and Cumming (2009) noted that the experiences and psychosocial development of youth athletes is largely stimulated by a coach-driven motivational climate. Expert coaching requires skills beyond excellent instruction or a winning record; it requires an awareness of and ability to affect the child’s satisfaction with the sport experience (Green & Chalip, 2001, p. 72). Good coaches are revered for their ability to balance fun while achieving success and parents want a coach who offers encouragement and can help a child develop such that their skills and performance improve (Martin et al., 1999).

In fact, coaches often become “institutions” in their own right, a by-product of their longstanding tenure with a given club, which can be beneficial or harmful. Although the club’s board of directors is responsible for organizational decisions, and is composed of parents, their tenure is often limited to the period their child’s involvement. In contrast, coaches often assume primary responsibility for the direction and attitude of the club by default, but overtime become the pillar of the club instilling their personal ethos on the club and its place in the community. There remains a gender imbalance in coaching in youth sport with males dominating the field of play (Seefeldt & Ewing, 1997), while perhaps not surprising given the gender imbalance amongst youth participants, this imbalance may have consequences for the

development of athletes in need of a strong female mentor. And yet, this gender imbalance represents and an opportunity for clubs to differentiate themselves through either a balanced coaching staff or prominent, successful female coach.

Coaches complete the athlete-coach-parent “athletic triangle,” (Martin et al., 1999), representing an equally important and similarly challenging pillar in youth sport. A coach’s time with athletes is often extensive, including travel, lodging, meals, and fundraising, and as such, coach’s often adopt new temporary roles as friend, teacher, or pseudo-parent (Ryckman & Hamel, 1995). High quality relationships between the athlete and coach can protect against anti-social behaviour, as the coach occupies a positive mentor role, providing emotional support and appropriate direction (Rutten et al., 2006). To date, the coaching literature has focused on training methods and coaching behaviour with relatively little attention paid to the role that coaches play in the club selection process. Given that a coach’s values guide and often come to define a sports club, clubs can capitalize on coach qualities to differentiate themselves from competitors and attract like-minded parents/athletes. Moreover, if coaches and administration understand better understand and promote the unique aspects of their clubs coaching philosophy they can better align themselves with their athletes and parents thus greatly improving the athletic experience (Green & Chalip, 1990).

2.8.1 Goal Orientations

Two common yet opposing approaches to coaching exist, the first is a task or mastery orientation whereby the coach is focused on skill-development; the second approach is focused on ego or performance (Smith et al., 2009). Noting the difference between the two is beneficial to gain insight into what motivates an athlete. A mastery-oriented athlete focuses attention toward effort and skill development, and is intrinsically motivated (Kontos & Malina, 2003). Conversely, performance-oriented athletes are extrinsically motivated and are more narrowly define success in terms of wins or accolades (Solomon & Boone, 1993). As previously discussed, coaches are largely responsible for the atmosphere and direction of a club and thus the coaching orientation that children experience. While younger athletes are more likely to adopt the intrinsic/extrinsic motivation espoused by his/her coach a mastery climate has been shown

to improve enjoyment by nurturing an independent intrinsic motivation (Brady, 2004), and praising effort rather than talent is essential to developing young athletes (Syed, 2010). In contrast, ego-oriented climates falter insofar as they; provide differential feedback based on competency, reinforce belief that success is due to superior ability and not effort, and induce higher levels of anxiety and disengagement when the athlete is considerably challenged (Solomon & Boone, 1993; Smith et al., 2009; McArdle & Duda, 2002).

Brower (1979) observes the two general types of coaches in the Little League world – those that are “humanistic” and those that are “macho.” In a wrestling context, studied by Burton and Martens (1986), they warn that a low generalized perception of ability, more likely to occur in an ego-driven climate, may transfer to other areas of a young athlete’s life. In the swim and track realm, appropriate notions of a mastery climate revolve around “personal bests” or “PB’s.” This approach allows athletes to achieve success by measuring personal progress which bolsters self-esteem and maintains enthusiasm for training (Light & Lémonie, 2010). Burton and Martens (1986), recommend that effective realization of personal objectives is best attributed to process-oriented elements such as hard work. This provides athletes with lower ability the opportunity to find success, in a positive and motivating environment.

Coaches can have a significant effect on child athletes, and the goal orientation they propagate is a channel for this influence (Smith et al., 2009). Children want to please their coach, and having little reference for personal limitations, will often go to extremes to do so. After only a brief period of time, a coach can significantly affect a child’s self-esteem (Coatsworth & Conroy, 2006). A coach’s influence can be profound as they can bring out the best in an athlete, or their approach to coaching can alienate and turn off a young athlete prompting the child or their family to prematurely withdraw club support, quit or even exit the a sport altogether. In fact, issues with coaching are the most often cited reason given by athletes and parents for their withdrawal from a sport or club.

2.9 Negative Aspects of Sport Participation

Although sport offers substantial benefit to its participants, the athletic environment can expose athletes to a number of negative realities and outcomes. For example, in the drive to succeed at all costs, coaches and parents can often be responsible for psychological burnout, physical injury, performance-enhancing drug usage, excessive stress, and anti-social behaviour (Albrecht & Strand, 2010; Wuerth et al., 2004; Stephens & Bredemeier, 1996; Gould, Wilson, Tuffey, & Lochbaum, 1993). These consequences lead to lower participation rates as athletes withdraw because they either no longer enjoy training/playing, or because they are forced to withdraw from competition.

Burnout is especially concerning given that today's youth already exhibit declining rates of physical activity, and because of their tendency to exit sport at increasingly younger ages. Attrition, as mentioned previously is a significant problem for sport clubs, with research suggesting that approximately one-third of participants withdraw from organized youth sports each year (Burton O'Connell Gillham and Hammermeister 2011). Burnout typically results from excessive competitive anxiety, excessive training, and psychological exhaustion (Kontos & Malina, 2003). Adult-perpetuated myths such as 'talent can be predicted at very early stages of development, sport specialization and year round training are necessary to 'make it,' winning is the best motivator, and 'physically developed athletes should enter elite programs earlier,' are often offered as causes for youth athlete burnout (Gould, 2009).

2.9.1 Early Specialization

Children today find themselves over-organized, inundated with instruction, and constantly evaluated (Martens 1996). This pressure has three sources in sports. Coaches the first source, who are most often well-intentioned, identify potential in young athletes and orient them in a direction where that potential is mined as quickly as possible in support of the coach's reputation. Parents, the second source of stress, want the best for their child and support the coach and the coaching philosophy. Surprisingly, the young athletes themselves are the third source (Gould 2010). Given the constant feedback they receive and the malleable

character they maintain, they too seek to please their parents and coaches, and buy into a theory of early competitiveness that is often stifling.

It has become increasingly common for children to be pressured to select one sport to specialize in, and at an increasingly younger age (Marano, 2008; Kontos & Malina, 2003). Sport specialization is defined as the age or point in time in an athlete's development when sports training and competition is limited to and focused on a single sport in the pursuit of elite performance (Capranica and Millard-Stafford 2011 p. 572). The theory is that early childhood skill development and training are required to reach elite performance levels. The debate continues whether children specializing early reach a higher performance level than those who sample different sports early and specialize in a single sport later (Capranica & Millard-Stafford, 2011).

Coakley (2010) cites two factors of the specialization shift, the first is a boom in entrepreneurial-fed youth sport programming (discussed earlier in sport privatization). Second is a change in parental value, whereby parents are now exerting greater pressure on children to succeed in sport (Coakley, 2010). Coakley (2009) suggests that a shift in the 1980s toward individualism instilled a new value in parents such that a child's (easily observable) sport performance created a tangible means to assert dominance over other parents (Gould 2010). The parents' almost ascetic devotion to the sport and child is demonstrated by driving, coaching, team feeding, laundering, managing, sponsoring, and emailing. In order to maintain this level of devotion, children and families are forced to choose between sports, forcing earlier specialization (Coakley, 2010). However, the "... risks of early specialization are higher attrition rates and adverse physical and emotional health outcomes" (Capranica & Millard-Stafford, 2011 p. 572). In fact, children who specialize early more commonly report suffering emotional exhaustion, a contributing factor to burnout (Gould 2010). Beyond these consequences, early specialization may also put undue stress on single parent, low income and other households or eliminate their children completely from performance-based sports (Coakley 2009).

Rowland (1998) suggests that parents and coaches must understand that a limited correlation exists between early specialization and later achievement in a specific sport. Too

often, adults push kids into high level sport before they've developed the appropriate skills or prepared psychologically to face comparisons to others (Martens 1996). This is the oft-occurring but rarely confessed "real goal" of youth sport (Frankl, 2007 p 6). To garner the benefits of practice, a child must be internally motivated and not because a parent or coach demands it (Syed, 2010). The performance of athletes from nations that use early talent identification and training, reveals how successful it can be if applied in the right context (Rowland 1998). Obviously, state-based early specialization does not occur in Canada and the USA, where early specialization is fuelled by parent and coach motives through the club sport system. However, it is the system of choice in China and some former Soviet countries. It appears that countries who rely on a state-based economic system are also the nations that utilize a state-planned sport system. In the USA, the sport system is nearly entirely market-based and clubs compete with each other for top members. Canada is similar to the USA, with the exception that government subsidization occurs more frequently, via club support (e.g. Alberta Development Initiative's program), national sport organization support (e.g. Sport Canada), and individual athlete support (e.g. varsity athlete scholarships, i.e. Jimmie Condon). Obviously it doesn't take state-based planning for a child to specialize too early.

Clearly injury is the most serious side-effect and concern attributed to early specialization. Coaches and parents set on quick performance gains, and athletes motivated to pursue these goals may encourage over training, fatigue or injury (March and Daigneault 1999). Improperly supervised or overly intense training can be detrimental in young athletes (Kontos & Malina, 2003 p. 242). Of the approximately 45 million youth athletes engaging in organized sport in the United States annually, 750,000 injuries occur requiring hospital-based emergency treatment. Numerous more occur that do not require a hospital visit. Despite the estimate that roughly 20% of youth athletes experience an injury, popular thought contends that sport is a safe pursuit and injuries are most often domain-specific (Stanitski 1997). A summary of the benefits and challenges associated with specialization is offered in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1 Benefits and Challenges of Early Sport Specialization (Gould 2010)

Benefits	Challenges
- Better coaching and skill instruction	- Economic cost
- Rapid skill acquisition via focused training	- Time commitment
- Improved time management	- Burnout
- Productive use of time	- Significant stress and pressure
- Enjoyment of sport and talent development	- Lost youth
	- Premature identity foreclosure

2.9.2 Stress

A pressing issue in competitive youth sport is psychological stress (Gould et al., 1993; Brower, 1979). Even in the early stages of sport or in recreation-oriented sport, “parents and coaches often exert undue pressure ... to perform at unrealistically high levels” (Kontos & Malina, p. 244). The significant emotional and physical investment made in highly demanding youth sports such as tennis and swimming ensures that performance becomes a central evaluative factor of one’s self-concept (Tesser, 1988). The emergence of ‘trophy kids,’ that seemingly accessorize an adult’s ego, fuel the aspiration of coaches and parents who sometimes take too much pride in the achievements of their child-athlete (Alsop, 2008). This reality reflects a changing society where nearly every facet of life has an opportunity for excellence and an early track to pursue it. However, as parents and children continue to seek greater attention and outlets for achievement, sport will continue to provide options for youth seeking more elite performances at increasingly younger ages.

Brower (1979) suggested that the pressure on young athletes is immense, because whether warranted or not, if the athlete does not reach expectations, they feel that they are letting their parents down, and/or make them unhappy. Young athletes often place tremendous personal pressure on themselves (particularly those with high aspirations), which can be damaging if they are not sufficiently mature to cope with failure. Success is derived through purposeful practice that requires an athlete to constantly strive for better performances. The paradox of elite performance is that these athletes fail more often than their less-elite colleague because they aspire for skills further beyond their reach (Syed, 2010).

Too often, a parent's support for a child's sport is motivated by the identity the family derives from that child's performance. Through the creation of a social identity derived vicariously from their child performance a parent is able to project his/her personal ambitions. Children pick up these cues and may struggle if they feel they are unable to achieve the parental aspirations (Lee & MacLean, 1997). Parental pressure is defined as the discrepancy between the expectations of the child and parent, and has been tied to dissatisfaction with sport participation (Smith 1986; Smith, Zingale, & Coleman, 1978). Parental expectations are a source of stress for young athletes because they are readily aware of the sacrifice that their parents are making to support their involvement (Passer, 1982). On top of this research indicates that parents are typically unprepared for the true extent of support required (Dorsch et al. 2009), while Côté (1999) found that parents' personal, financial, and familial sacrifices escalated significantly over the course of their child's athletic career.

Young athletes endure significant stress while pursuing their sport, and parents are in a position to support the athlete by encouraging them, or by increasing the stress by placing further pressure (Leff & Hoyle, 1994). Appropriate levels of stress experienced through sport in a safe environment can provide valuable lessons for dealing with future challenges associated with life, but should not be exacerbated by parents (Kontos & Malina, 2003). In fact, over-involved parents represent one of most common challenges for coaches. Vocal criticism, frequent attendance at training, sideline coaching, overt pressure on athletes, and unrealistic expectations on the team are some of the more common challenges posed by parents (Lee &

MacLean, 1997). Tension results when there is an incongruity in values between the adults involved in the program and the child (Frankl, 2007). Lee and MacLean (1997) argue for an environment where parents are aware of the specific needs of their children and try to foster an environment that meets those needs. Specifically, this requires an open discussion of their involvement with regard to the sport so that both parties participate in defining their role. To this end it has been shown that both boys and girls enjoy higher levels of season-long enjoyment in their sport, when they experience lower levels of perceived parental pressure. The role that parents play in their child's sport experience has a direct effect upon the degree of enjoyment the young athlete receives (Brustad, 1988). Martens (1996, p.309) described the significance of parental influence on youth sport participation:

Children need guidance and discipline for sure, but we need to be very conscious of over imposing adult goals on children's participation in physical activity. If our goal is to turn kids on to physical activity for a lifetime, then we need to recognize that it is vital that children have positive experiences if we hope for them to choose to participate in these activities as adults. If we adults force them to participate in physical activities and make that experience negative, we should certainly not be surprised that when children have a choice, they will not choose physical activity. We should especially expect them not to choose physical activity when so many other things are easier to choose.

The trifecta of pressure from parents, coaches, and the youth athlete themselves may lead to physical injuries in the motivated athlete, psychological anomie in the uncertain athlete, and anguish in less-gifted athlete (Marsh & Daigneault, 1999).

2.10 Preliminary Segmentation Models

Market segmentation is the division of a heterogeneous market into smaller homogenous markets based on similar consumer traits and preferences with respect to demand satisfying products or services (Smith, 1956). Segmentation is a common practice in most consumer markets and is generally accepted that segmentation variables can be subsumed by four broad segmentation dimensions: demographic, geographic, psychographic

and behavioural (Weinstein, 1994). The sport literature often notes the need for a clearer focus on the segmentation of sport participants in order to deliver the desired sport product or service. To date, only a few studies have discussed any aspect of youth club segmentation. Taks and Scheerder's (2006) work *Youth Sport Participation Styles and Mark Segmentation Profiles: Evidence and Applications* is likely the strongest contributor to date. Segmentation helps position services toward target groups to meet their needs, increasing market share by attracting and satisfying the desires of under-served segments (Taks & Scheerder, 2006). Kirk and MacPhail (2003) positioned parents on behavioural and participation factors, but didn't address participant expectations – perhaps the most relevant aspect of club choice. Robinson (2006) suggested that sport club segmentation can be based on the performance level needs of the users. Similar to the earlier discussion, Robinson (2006) suggested that members will have different expectations of a sports club dependent upon whether they are at an elite or recreational level.

In the sport context, Taks and Scheerder (2006) argued that the usage and behaviour dimension provide the most value in club segmentation. These dimensions include frequency of participation, intensity of participation (the number of hours spent), diversity of participation (the number of sports practiced), context of participation (organized versus non-organized), and different sports practiced. With respect to the youth participant market specifically, Taks and Scheerder (2006) suggested that gender, age, school program, socio-economic status, and parental sports participation are strong determinants. The extant literature has identified a variety of factors, such as social class (Scheerder et al., 2005), gender (Seefeldt & Ewing, 1997; De Knop et al., 1996) and parents' own interest in sport (Scheerder et al., 2005b), correlated with teenager club-sport participation (Jakobsson et al., 2012; Yang et al., 1996) that could be used in the segmentation and ultimately positioning process. It should be noted that many of these variables support the work of Taks and Scheerder (2006).

Initial segmentation efforts in the sport club market have looked at factors that might be applicable to the broader club market, rather than specific to a single sport. Given the sport club market's continued move to earlier athlete specialization it is likely that such broad

approaches to segmentation would mask the unique characteristics of a sport critical to effectively segmenting the athlete/family market. For example, Côté's (1999) model suggests a segmentation of the different types of youth athletes entering the club sport system but it's actually more of a post hoc description of participation outcomes, and thus offers little utility. The categories offered by Côté (1999) are:

1. The Samplers:

Samplers participate in a range of sports, and their key motivation is fun and enjoyment. Focus is on playing (structured but non-competitive fun) rather than training.

2. The Beginning Specializers:

From phase one, a child will either leave sport or move towards early specialization. This likely occurs in the early teen years, where the range of sports is reduced and a focus toward competition develops.

3. The Investors:

In phase three, the athlete is now focused on a single sport, where competition and performance are increasingly the primary objectives for participation.

As previously discussed, Jacobs (2007) research defined three participation levels in a very similar manner; Sports as Fun, Sports as Moderate Competition, and Sports as High Competition. Côté's (1999) and Jacobs (2007) segmentation overlap, but represent very different perspectives, with Côté (1999) focused on the formal or explicit commitment to a pursuit, while Jacobs (2007) approach is more focused on participant expectations regardless of activity. Again, it is a thoughtful segmentation, but it is not applicable to specific sports and therefore lacks value to marketing practitioners seeking to attract and retain specific members.

Canadian Sport for Life (Canadian Sport Centres, 2010) segments athletes through its Long Term Athlete Development plan. This plan takes into consideration a lifetime of sport participation, and is highly regarded within Canadian and International sport circles. This plan

delineates the type of training and expectations that should be placed on athletes at different stages in their career:

1. Active Start (0-6 years)
2. FUNdamentals (Males 6-9 years, Females 6-8 years)
3. Learning to Train (Males 9-12 years, Females 8-11 years)
4. Training to Train (Males 12-16 years, Females 11-15 years)
5. Training to Compete (Males 16-23 +/- years, Females 15-21 +/- years)
6. Training to Win (19 +/- years, Females 18 +/- years)
7. Active for Life (enter at any age)

While this approach does a good job of providing a prescription for youth athletes at various ages, it is clearly not sport specific nor does it provide any room for differentiation. For example, Kirk and MacPhail (2003) would identify the British runners aged 9-11 in their study as “Learning to Train,” similarly aged swimmers in Light and Lémonie’s (2010) French study are already into the “Training to Train” segment. Gymnasts and bobsledders progress through this process very differently. In any case though, like Côté’s (1999) and Jacob’s (2007) segmentation, this approach doesn’t offer a lot of value in targeting a well-segmented group of young athletes for recruitment into a specific sport, or into a specific club.

Flemish (Belgium) data derived from IKSport, a management tool for sport clubs, provides their national picture. Despite the data surfacing from Belgium, our cultures are similar enough to draw some value from this European data. De Knop et al. (2004) found that most Flemish clubs (67%) offered sport programming for competitive and recreational pursuits. 23% of clubs maintained a singular focus on recreation, while 10% had an achievement-oriented approach. So this suggests that roughly 10% of participants in any particular sport may have the competitive orientation that is relevant to the focus of the current study.

Some researchers have focused specifically on segmenting parents on attendance behaviour. Parental involvement is represented on a continuum from under involvement to moderate, to over involvement (Hellstedt, 1987) with four parental personas being identified; the non-attenders, the spectators, the helpers, and the committed members (Kirk & MacPhail,

2003). Kirk and MacPhail's (2003) typology of participant parents is discussed in greater detail here:

1. The Non-Attender:

These parents demonstrate non-engagement with the club. They are perceived by coaches and engaged parents as uncommitted, or more harshly as freeloaders. The Non-Attender likely has little interest in the sport beyond their child's desire to participate, or may be unable to participate more fully due to factors such as shift work.

2. The Spectator:

These parents typically attend most of the training sessions and games but take no formal role in the management of the club or athletes. Most parents that occupy more active roles began as spectators. While the spectator parent may be unable (i.e., single parent) or simply unwilling to participate in club operations but they maintain an active interest in his or her child's development.

3. The Helper:

Helpers generally fill unofficial roles to support the team such as assisting the coach or serving drinks and snacks. Helpers usually transition from the spectator role, and having gained an understanding, familiarity, and confidence in the club what it has to offer and its resource constraints, volunteered or responded to requests to help the club.

4. The Committed Member:

This individual has a great degree of history and rapport with the club and its operations, and often acts as a link between the organization and the parents. This parent-type is engaged beyond what is required or expected from a parent. This parent is often seen to have past or present committee experience.

This segmentation is not particularly helpful as part of a marketing plan.

Building on the a priori work on youth sport club participant behaviour and the resultant typologies the current thesis seeks to explore the expectations and realities facing each

constituent of “athletic triangle” in an attempt to derive a more robust and practical model of market segmentation. This research extends the extant sport literature by examining the attitudes and behaviours of not just one, but all three stakeholders in the athletic triangle: coaches, parents and youth athletes. In addition, the thesis purposely examines stakeholders from a wide variety of sport clubs within just one sport to demonstrate the limitations offered by previous attempts to develop a “general” model of youth sport participation. The goal of this research is to provide those governing and guiding the sport, and the clubs responsible for youth athlete development with a means to more effectively attract and retain the “right” athletes. The benefits of the segmentation model developed by this research will be a better alignment of training and coaching practice with athlete aspirations, and thus a more satisfying sport experience for parents and athletes, decreased attrition and a more stable and sustained club sport market offering. No less important is a sport system that more efficiently and effectively delivers on its goals of: increased participation, lifelong involvement and improved athlete performance.

Ultimately, it is believed that insights gained from the current research will provide a framework to guide practitioner efforts to segment other youth sports, and raise questions for further research into the youth club sport phenomenon. The next section outlines the methodology used to capture athlete, coach and parental insights into the sport club experience.

Chapter 3: Methodology

In order to better understand how club sports are consumed it was first necessary to gain a more complete understanding of how sport programming was delivered in one specific sports community. This market overview required an analysis of market offerings with respect to gaps and overlaps in delivery, and the measure of participant perceptions of those offerings. The general dearth of club sport research, absence of studies focused on the simultaneous athletic experience of athletes, parents and coaches, and an absence of a priori hypotheses prompted an exploratory methodology. And while there are a variety of approaches to gather data, none offers the intimacy or depth of direct interaction that a qualitative approach does, particularly valuable in a research context characterized by significant variability with respect to age and expertise - young athletes, parents and coaches. Specifically, it was decided to conduct a mixed-methods, qualitative approach with depth interviews and focus groups given the ethical constraints associated with conducting interviews with children. Depth interviews are particularly insightful in research contexts wherein key informant descriptions of a phenomenon are critical for understanding. A subjective methodology, depth or long interviews enlighten not only through dialogue, but also through interpretation of body language and participant intonation (Opdenakker, 2006). Similar to depth interviews, focus groups follow a similar conversational interview structure but benefit from the group's willingness to exchange, debate and develop ideas and opinions in a way that ultimately offers a greater richness of insight (Rabiee, 2004). For the purposes of the current research, qualitative research can best be summarized as an approach that allows the researcher to make sense of narrative data (Tesch, 1990).

Athletes, parents, and coaches, participated in either a focus group (athletes) or interview (parents and coaches). The triadic approach gathered a spectrum of positions and experiences, reflecting the club sport environment with greater depth. The study followed ethical guidelines as approved by the University of Calgary, requiring consent from each club and all participants (Appendices B and C). The names of the athletes, parents, coaches, and clubs are anonymous.

Upon identifying the goals and methodology for this research, the next step was to identify the specific club sport context within which to explore the club sport experience. Competitive swimming was a strong candidate. Swimming is highly accessible and has high participation rates, with programs that are offered in a variety of locations, to a breadth of athletes and at significantly different prices that are suggestive of some degree of segmentation, be it proactive, strategic and market-oriented; reactive and competition-oriented; or simply focused on short-term goals such as club survival. Similar to Hoyle and Leff's (1997) study on youth tennis players, swimmers were chosen for this study because their performance is evaluated individually while parents have ample opportunity to become involved with the sport. Hoyle and Leff's (1997) description applies to swimmers in that the evaluation of the athlete's experience and program is based on individual performance, which removes the potential for biased contributions that are present in a team environment and there is greater clarity in the triadic relationship amongst its three participants. (Dorsch, 2009; Power & Woolger, 1994).

Competitive swimming is also unique in that it is an amateur sport. Although somewhat of an antiquated term, "amateur" more or less refers to a sport lacking a professional pathway – league, series or tournament schedule - to aspire to. The decision to study a sport that embodies these qualities, maintains the purity of participation motives because the potential for economic gain are, for all but the rarest of cases (e.g., Ian Thorpe, Ryan Lochte, Michael Phelps), of limited consequence. In addition, parents and coaches play an integral role in the athlete's participation and the program's application. In team sport, those relationships are much more ambiguous. Swimming has recently experienced a resurgence in North America, due to the media attention afforded to Michael Phelps (the most decorated Olympic medalist), and Dara Torres (the eldest Olympic swimming medalist at age 41) who are idolized by young athletes and their parents. Despite this resurgence, competitive swimming has received little research attention and in this regard shares much with a number of amateur sports.

3.1 Competitive Swimming in Canada

A quick description of the history of competitive swimming and the nuances of the sport follows in an attempt to add context to the results section. Swimming as sport was formalized during the 19th century (Arnaud, 1987) with the sport making its Olympic debut in 1896, with four events, it has been a part of every Games since. Its international federation, Federation Internationale de Natation (FINA) was founded in 1908 due to the sport's growing popularity (Light & Lémonie, 2010). In Canada, competitive swimming is delivered under the auspices of Swim Natation Canada (SNC) that was established in 1909, and oversees programming to nearly 19,000 athletes.

Activities like organized sport engage systematized training and competitive opportunities, in a highly structured and time consuming manner, where performance is a central focus (Coakley, 1983). Swimming demands a significant commitment and places considerable physical, emotional, and psychological pressure on its athletes. In a sport, as “competitive and time-intensive as swimming, only children with strong intrinsic motivation are able to make it to the highest level” (Power and Woolger, 2000, p. 604). The sport is recognized for instilling qualities of discipline, time management, and tenacity a strong social learning atmosphere and its promotion of identity development (Light, 2010). In swimming, athletes must achieve increasingly difficult qualification times to reach the next level of competition. These increasing demands force the athletes and parents to cope with more stress (Wuerth et al., 2004). Despite considerable research devoted to youth swimming in the areas of sport science and recreation, little work has focused on its socio-cultural aspects (Light & Lémonie, 2010) In Canada, swimming is a highly developed and competitive sport and is an ideal context to pursue themes that may be harder to access in less well-developed sports or in those complicated by a professional path. Finally, the swimming community's support for and interest in the study prompted a research environment that was fun, welcoming and that most importantly offered valuable insights.

There are three competitive swimming offerings; full-year competitive, summer competitive, and winter recreational. The competition-oriented clubs offer the most robust

programs, including learn-to-swim (LTS) programs for six to nine year olds, vigorous training opportunities, and access to domestic, national, and eventually international competition. Swimmers join competitive programs from one of two streams. The first is through an LTS program that leads to tougher training and competitive options as they age. LTS programs ensure that there is a constant pool of young new talent available to the club and its competitive programs. Swim clubs typically operate the LTS programs on a year round basis in order to socialize/acclimate young swimmers to the year-round demands of competitive insuring as seamless as possible transition occurs. Sometimes the LTS / feeder system may be formally linked and in others it may maintain an autonomous (for fund raising purposes). Of the seven clubs in this study, all offer this program. The second means to entry occurs at a later stage when an athlete moves to a new city or chooses to leave his or her current team. This happens often enough that swimming's governing body has rules in place restricting how soon an athlete is eligible to compete for a new team. A number of athletes in this study changed clubs at least once.

A space typically separates parent from athlete and coach during training, for example an unspoken rule is that parents are not welcome on the pool deck. In many instances, a coach may not be able identify the parents of his (or her) athlete. Due to the athlete-coach ratio, swimmer communication with the coach is often limited as well. Despite this distance, the relationship between athlete, coach and parent holds a certain kind of intimacy, in part predicated on the commitment each makes to his/her roles. And be it in the water, on deck, or in the stands, each individual's evaluation of the swimming experience is distinct.

Unfortunately, the main limiting factor for swimmer development is a lack of facilities, a common occurrence in many cities where recreational facilities often lags population growth. For example, in the focal city of study there are just two Olympic size pools for a city and surrounding area of well over 1,000,000 people. One quadrant of the city would greatly benefit from a third pool's development and undoubtedly, current clubs would take over the territory to extend their breadth and/or new clubs would arise, servicing an unmet portion of the market. A second external limiting factor resides in the requirements that the provincial and

national governing body (SNC) place on clubs. Club's yearly training plans are predicated on the schedules that both the provincial (PSO) and national swim organizations (NSO) create, and the funding that is attached to certain benchmarks. In fact, members expressed difficulty reaching personal and club goals because of the confines of these governing body requirements as conflicts have arisen regarding competition selection.

3.1.1 The Club Swimming Community

The city selected for the study has a population of over one million; with roughly 142,000 youth aged 10 – 19. It is an affluent city where median family income is \$79,084 (StatsCan, 2006). This project focuses on athletes who are aspiring to reach provincial and national teams, university level swimming, and in some cases the Olympic Games and the clubs that strive to help them to achieve those goals. The city has a history of swimming success, producing multiple Olympians. It has seven independent competitive clubs, which primarily train out of a large multi-sport centre and the city's university (Appendix D). There are 1,316 swimmers registered in the seven competitive full-year clubs according to the provincial swim organization. There are a total of 1,987 registered swimmers in this city, including all clubs (masters, summer club, and an intellectual-disability focused club). There are three summer swim clubs and four masters clubs. Each of the seven full-year, competitive teams also operate feeder-style, "learn-to-swim" programs. Access to each club was organized through the respective club presidents.

3.1.2 Data Acquisition

Swimmers were segregated into two groups; aged 13-15 (DOB: 1996 – 1998) and 16-18 (DOB: 1995 – 1993). In this particular market, there are 386 and 154 swimmers in each of these two respective age cohorts. These cohorts were selected because of the considerable change in training and competitive level that an athlete demonstrates when progressing through the sport. The shift around the age of sixteen often represents an increase in expectations and commitment, and the intent in the focus groups was to capture the unique sentiment within each group. Participant swimmers had to be a Swim Natation Canada (SNC) registered athlete

and be involved swimming with an SNC affiliated club. Head coaches were selected for interviews to insure maximum variation of club competitiveness, size and status. Parent participants were accessed through the recommendation of coaches, swimmers, and the club's boards in an effort to gain insights from a range of parent involvement.

The interviews were digitally recorded and took place between January 28, 2012 and June 12, 2012, in total 8 individual interviews were conducted while the remaining 39 participants engaged in focus groups (Appendix E). The interviews averaged 30 minutes in length, while the focus groups averaged just over 25 minutes in length. The interviews and focus groups roughly followed the interview script and questions found in Appendix F that sought to define the market space, identify expectations and resultant (dis)satisfaction, while exploring any unmet needs or expectations. The interviews were an iterative process whereby the first set informed and the following interviews allowed for deeper exploration of interesting topics and themes. In the process, these emergent themes revealed a number of opportunities youth club sport has to focus marketing efforts, and revise the product/service offering to better attract and develop young athletes. This approach takes advantage of the unique perspective held by each member of the athletic triangle, while capturing as broad a cross section of attitudes and behaviours as possible.

Chapter 4: Results

4.1 Participants

The participants in this study were a focused group of individuals. Across participants and clubs, there was a commonality in goal-oriented behaviour, driven personalities, and strong time management. Nearly every participant referenced time management and organizational skills as an asset enabling their participation. Athletes described increased strength, discipline, team work, respect, perseverance, and character leadership skills, resulting from their participation. There was not a single participant, swimmer or parent, who was not planning to (or anticipate their child would) pursue a university education. A surprising comment from participant and swimmer Travis; “There is an interesting correlation between university and swimming.”

Many athletes and parents in this study have changed clubs, contemplated changing clubs in the past, or are considering a move in the future. In these situations athletes and parents described feeling forgotten, alienated, or guilty because they were in a setting that did not align well with their values and needs. Participants went on to identify or allude to gaps and overlaps in the market. Gaps are areas of unmet demand, and overlaps are areas that are served by more than one club. This concept surfaced after many participants described themselves as underserved with a club at some point in their swimming tenure, or when evaluating a future move, the impression that some clubs could be grouped together because of their likeness. Most did note though, that there are more options now than at any previous point.

4.1.1 Swimmers

Most athletes found themselves involved in swimming for similar reasons; a parent thought it a suitable sport to place their child in for fun, safety, and fitness, often at age 6 or 7. As the swimmer progressed, and as opportunities for competition, scholastic prospects and travel (training camps and meets) became more evident the athlete and family’s involvement became more serious. For more elite swimmers, the experience to compete against other high

quality athletes is a very attractive incentive. Interestingly, the goal of making money in swimming was mentioned. This is achieved through carding (a monthly stipend) a form of support received while competing on the National Team. The swimmers interviewed, generally, demonstrated a level of commitment far above what is usually observed in individuals of this age. Chris noted that: “Time management, perseverance, knowing my limits and what I am able to achieve if I put my mind to it, organisational skills, essentially everything I know about myself, I learned through swimming.”

4.1.2 Parents

To this point, literature on the relationship of the parent within the youth sport setting has focused on delinquent parents who impede the athletic experience. Little attention has focused on understanding how their involvement might enhance the athletic experience for themselves, coaches and athletes. And thus, there are themes beyond the difficult parent that warrant attention, and in particular how they might better navigate the complex purchase process required to identify and select the club of best fit for their child. For instance, parents revealed that they felt it was their responsibility to foster their child’s development while protecting them from harm. As Helen noted with considerable emotion; because of “the time commitment and the conflict between the trainer and her, and I make the decision we should go.”

4.1.3 Coaches

The coach occupies a difficult role with often conflicting responsibilities to the club, athletes and parents. Each coach has a different philosophy and he/she has the most direct and significant influence on the club’s direction. And yet, most coaches emphasized how challenging it is to transform a club and the behaviour of its membership to achieve his or her vision. Coach Hector described this ongoing transition that is in year seven of ten:

That (wasn’t) the way it was when I got here. They thought of themselves as a very strong program, with a high identity and a high profile. They had all the right accoutrements, but they didn’t have any performance. They had the

track suit, they had the money in the bank, good organizational skills and commitment and loyalty, but they couldn't swim. So the point becomes, 'they say we want to be a good swim team.' 'Ok do you know what that means?' They're still learning. It takes time and they need to have first one of their athletes come all the way through to the absolute highest levels.

Some coaches preferred a very streamlined club, in terms of operation and service, while other coaches preferred a robust offering requiring greater operational support. And while coaches demonstrated a somewhat Machiavellian faith in their coaching style that superseded any question or objection from membership, those clubs with the least internal dissension were characterized by a strong alignment between the coach and the established ethos of the club.

4.2 Clubs

4.2.1 Sharks

The Sharks are the most progressive team in the city, comprising the largest number of accomplished swimmers. It is the largest team, with the most training groups and broadest variety of programming. Coach Hector noted in the interview that historically its competition came from the Turtles as that was the city's other highly competitive team, but now, there are fewer athletes that contend with Shark athletes so the club increasingly looks beyond the province and country for competitive opportunities. Parent Marc felt that the Sharks are so "overtly successful (that) it's hurting the swim community in Calgary." Delivering this level of programming comes at a high financial cost and significant volunteer commitment.

The Sharks train exclusively out of the same centre as three of the other teams (the Pirates, Speed, and Marlins). Of the 120 swimmers in the 13-18 year old segment, 50 are at the AGN or Senior National level. Swimmer's train in 7 to 9 sessions per week, with most training at the higher frequency level, additionally athletes participate in dry land sessions two to four times per week. Weekly workouts for this age group would typically involve 22-24 hours per week (Marc), with younger athletes spending more time in dry land training and less swimming.

10 competitive meets per season is typical and club fees are roughly \$3,000 to \$4,000, not including competition and travel expenses according to one parent (Marc), but can run as high as \$15,000 if an athlete participates in all competitive and training opportunities.

The aforementioned costs were not seen as a major concern for parents, and yet value for this investment (i.e., well run training sessions, improvements in technique, strength or stamina) were viewed as important to parents and athletes. Only one athlete interviewed from this club was found to participate in school or club sports outside of swimming (cross country running). Marc noted that his family is “centred on swimming.” Marc felt that “We say we are a club that will allow every swimmer to compete to the best of their ability, but yet it really is about who got what time. And of course breaking provincial records and national records.”

That the club is specialized, focusing on developing competitive swimmers is obvious, and that it demands commitment and attends to its top performers is perhaps similarly unsurprising;

We don’t make any excuses or apologies for trying to be a performance program. Not everyone wants to buy into the performance side of the equation. They have difficulty with it and we often encourage those people to find a different program to swim for because they are at odds with our objectives (Coach Hector).

Athletes indicated that they valued the “professional” environment they train in (John). Tiff stated that the Sharks have “an image and we respect and promote it” and that it is “there to make swimmers.” The Sharks participate in an annual meet in Germany, so travel is covered. Each focus group participant intended to or was also swimming for a university team, three had represented Canada at an international meet already, and two have aspirations for an Olympic team. Each Shark athlete in the focus group was also attending a “sport school” (often a charter school) that accommodated their training schedule and time abroad.

And while the club appeared to do an excellent job working with its top athletes and those committed to its training requirements, it was not a satisfying athletic experience for all athletes and families and was not perfect. For instance, athletes that left the Sharks noted that

their coach and even team mates often didn't even know their name. Indeed, Marc commented that the club is "not accommodating..., is strict..., (and) convenience isn't a focus."

When asked to identify a brand of car that best represented their team (a projective technique used to foster conversation and build rapport with focus group participants), athletes felt that it would be something like a BMW M3, a high quality, expensive, and fast. The athletes in this focus group perceived their club as unique and extremely driven to perform. Not only had the athletes bought into this ethos, but they expressed a sincere devotion to their coach, a man deeply committed to their performance.

Coach Hector specifically noted three differentiating factors of the Sharks: 1) a commitment to the principles of the aforementioned Long Term Athlete Development framework (i.e., manifest within the Sharks as individualized training programs specific to different needs and responses to fatigue by each athlete) – 2) high coach-athlete ratio (e.g., as many as four coaches are on deck in one workout), and 3) athletes are exposed to all coaches, so there is the greatest possible dissemination of knowledge. Its coaching staff is larger than most teams, and very experienced. The team is seen as an innovator as it was one of the first to emphasize and incorporate dry land training; a development philosophy that subsequently became common across clubs. It also offers on deck massage, and utilizes a variety of peripheral training tools not available to members of other clubs.

The Sharks program is "run like a business" and is "very financially sound" (Coach Hector). In contrast to most clubs, the Sharks' coach is contracted and not an employee. "What is special about this group is a demarcation between the competitive arm and the business arm of the club" (Coach Hector). The business arm being LTS programming (run out of two community pools) and summer camps, which act as feeder systems and profit centres. The Sharks also offer a summer swim team option, which is an abbreviated, less competitive swimming option (an athlete must exclusively swim for either full year or summer). The Sharks are the only team with this summer option, which represents not only a third feeder system but a unique source of revenue. Further highlighting its market leadership position, the club had

just recently inaugurated an adult swim program, suggesting its focus on the competitive youth swimmer might be changing somewhat.

After seven years at the helm the coach felt that to achieve the highest levels of competitive club swimming, the Sharks would need to strengthen three aspects of the club: its financial position, the political environment, and its performance or technical proficiency. He recognized this is a long transition, and felt that to secure parental buy-in would require proof that the Sharks' training approach worked as evidenced by a club developed athlete making the National team and then having success at the International level. The club has a five year strategic plan that is reviewed annually and a mandate to "be among the world's leading swim programs in all areas" (Hector). Metrics are used to assess the club's competitive stature not just in the community, but within the country and internationally. In this club, there is a clear objective, clear product, and clearly defined customer to service.

4.2.2 Pirates

The Pirates are a performance-oriented club, with a contrasting style to many other teams. It values a simplified approach with fewer offerings, but remains oriented toward future podium performances. The club evolved from a YMCA swim program, into an autonomous competitive club forty years ago. Its goal is to develop each swimmer to the university-level through a program that encourages a lot of racing, but leaves room to increase training volume once athletes reach 18 years of age. Coach Peter notes they "really offer a program that's very patient. That would be the main theme. We don't try to push young kids really hard."

In the past year, 15 of its athletes had competed at the Age Group National or Senior National level, out of about 90 swimmers in the 13-18 age group. Total club size is about 185, plus there are multi-sport athletes and a separate offering for Masters swimmers (typically athletes 25yrs and older) comprising another 175 participants. Finally, an independent LTS program is available to 200 swimmers aged 6-9 at a smaller community pool. Athletes swim fewer workouts per week, typically six and no more than eight (totalling 11 to 14 hours per week). Like most clubs, athletes typically compete in around 8 meets per season. Team fees are

approximately \$1800. Like other clubs, fees increase when national or international meets and camps are included. The Pirates include dry land training, but no other services are offered. The Pirates are a more affordable club, and interestingly even some athletes were aware of this; “the practical side is that it was a better money situation” (Angelina).

The team is unique in that its training groups are determined by age and not ability. This is atypical, and serves to encourage laggards who are surrounded by stronger athletes, as well as limit young prodigies from burning out by taking on increasingly difficult workouts. Coach Peter noted the team’s commitment to serving athlete needs valuing maturity, age, and social factors. Peter said he coaches a “program that’s very patient... We try to keep them longer, keep them in the sport the whole way along by not over-programming them at a younger age.” With reference to other clubs, he felt that

there are plenty of kids in the province that if the kids good, they train them more, and we simply don’t do that... I’ve seen all those top teams go through a ton of kids who never come out the other end. And if that’s what we are doing then we are failing the kids. They be able to reach the age of 17 having experienced success and learned all they need to know about swimming and then take that on the university level.

The club philosophy accepts participation in other activities outside swimming. “Personally, I don't have a problem with swimmers expanding their sports horizon, especially at the younger levels” (Coach Peter). However he also noted that “these activities tend to conflict with swim time and choices have to be made.” Valerie (mother) felt that the Pirates “are one of the few clubs that really supports kids doing other stuff, particularly other athletic stuff.”

Valerie, a Pirate parent, described her child’s move to the Pirates and her affinity to the coaching philosophy of the club. Leaving one of the larger teams she described as a “big machine that supplements elite swimmers,” Valerie noted that burnout is less common with the Pirate’s training approach. The main concerns Valerie had with other club options in the city were “too much training at a young age, expenses are higher, and parental volunteer demand.”

Despite that, progress is expected from Pirates athletes as Coach Peter explained – “success is based on improvement which is a measurement of time.”

Athletes value their relationship with the coach(es), describing them as funny, supportive, and balanced. Sarah, for example made a point of discussing how her coach (Peter), had learned her name during her first day of swimming, a stark contrast to her experience at the original club she joined where she felt the coach struggled to recall her name after a season. Athletes and parents were drawn to the Pirates based on the quality of coaching and economic value it offered. At the same time, parents and swimmers expressed pride in their club because of the Olympian it had produced. One athlete said that when she was planning to change clubs, the Pirates had returned her family’s phone call faster than any other clubs, an attention to athlete service that she and her family appreciated. Most interviewed intended to race at the university level, while all intended to pursue a university education. When asked to describe the Pirates club as brand or style of car, they chose a minivan based on the following characteristics; family-oriented, packed full, powerful, eco-friendly (given team volunteer efforts at a soup kitchen and the Terry Fox run each year).

Coach Peter described a preference for “stream-lining” in all aspects. This includes training, account management, volunteer requirements and so on. Valerie (parent) noted the economic value offered by the club suggesting that even though for her it was a “consideration, not a deal maker,” price sensitive parents did view the Pirates favourably. However, Valerie did appreciate the fact that there was no fundraising commitment (e.g., working at bingos), although a casino commitment every year and a half and officiating at meets was. Coach Peter noted that the club “avoids the punitive stance” many other clubs take, with regard to enforcing volunteerism as it creates a negative atmosphere and does not further anyone’s position. Every aspect of the club has been examined to insure that it is offered in the most efficient and effective manner. For instance, the club has chosen to use paid positions to serve roles that require detailed attention, with the added benefit of alleviating undo pressure on volunteers. The result is a price-competitive club, offering performance opportunities, with a goal of enabling each swimmer to compete at the university level.

4.2.3 Turtles

The Turtles organization is unique as its club trains exclusively out of a university pool, and is deeply intertwined with the university team. It shares the same team name, and represents the first phase of a multi-faceted feeder system. The goal orientation of the team is elite performance with a pedigree defined by its past Olympic swimmers. Athletes with higher training loads are in the pool for nine to eleven workouts per week, totalling 15 to 25 hours including dry land sessions. Athletes compete in eight to ten meets each year. For Michelle's child, who has been swimming with the club for ten years, the Sharks were initially an alternative to YMCA programming. Michelle said she appreciated the "friendliness" of the YMCA, but it lacked "technical focus." Michelle, similar to Marc (parent) of the Sharks bluntly stated "We are a competitive swim family."

Shark team fees are around \$4,000, and as the club strongly encourages away meets and camps, this escalates to yearly costs of \$8,000 to \$10,000. Seldom were athletes aware of their cost to participate, but they often intuitively recognized an ordinal ranking across clubs. For example, Austin correctly commented "I am pretty sure it's cheaper than the Sharks and more expensive than the Pirates" to swim for the Turtles. Beyond the significant financial commitment, the Turtles also required a significant volunteer commitment that Michelle estimated at 80 hours per season. Proximity is highly valued by Turtle athletes, who tend to live very close to the university, and/or benefit from the university's ease of access for public transit for those athletes who live too far to walk or bike to workouts (Austin - For me it was mainly location. It's really close to my house, it's easy to get here").

The club accommodates those with goals beyond the pool, for example Austin (athlete) who also competes in triathlon stated, "...they encourage all workouts, but don't punish if there's conflict." When considering what type of car best represents the Turtles club, athletes felt that the Honda Civic was the best choice due to the club's reputation/"pedigree" for speed (but not the fastest), its "hard working" ethic, and it "not being the most expensive" (Austin).

An interesting finding that emerged from interviews and focus groups, from the Turtles and numerous other clubs, was the number of swim families with only one working parent, a family-feature that was instrumental in supporting the child's swimming until he/she was old enough to attend practices alone. A non-working parent ensured transportation to morning workouts starting at 6 AM, and evening workouts starting at 3:15. Parent Michelle noted that the club has a storied history of elite swimming, but has changed recently. Particularly in terms of coaching, where turnover has been a significant issue. And given that it is a "large club," this has "equated to messy details" (Michelle). As a result, of these club issues, Michelle mentioned that she had looked at alternatives considering the Pirates (where she felt the club is "concerned with the person rather than the swimmer") and the Sharks (although she's concerned that the city's other "super competitive" club would not present a different training setting). However, the proximity of the Turtle pool and the relationships developed with teammates had thus far outweighed the desire to leave. The club has about 74 swimmers in the 13-18 segment and 450 swimmers in total.

With its own pool at the university, the club is able to monopolize training time and maximize opportunities for its athletes. Given its development role for the university team; Turtle athletes enjoy the advantage of training with those athletes on occasion. Members of this club value proximity and performance. As Michelle noted, improvement plays a "big role" and when your child "swims well, they are happy." Similar to the Sharks, members placed less importance on price relative to other factors. Austin and other athletes noted that coaching was not a determinant for joining, whereas the club's previous performance was "for sure" a factor. Austin also noted, "I wouldn't have joined this club if there weren't fast swimmers in it ...that really helps your decision to join that club." Team mate Henry, who's been a Turtle for ten seasons, commented "(my) parents wanted me to have options, so if I ever did want to consider the Olympics I could train with this club up to that point."

Interestingly, the most difficult club to interview was also the largest, where a significant degree of bureaucracy exists perhaps explaining the reluctance to participate. This bureaucracy was confirmed by former Turtle swimmers who experienced distance between coaches and

athletes, lack of team camaraderie, and limited individual attention. It was surprising that despite its 450 total members, the Turtles club was the least willing to participate in this study.

4.2.4 Manta

Team Manta is one of two teams in the city operating within a private club. Non-club members are not able to swim for this team, except in extenuating situations. The coach has no outside swimmers now, and does not anticipate any in the near future. The club reaches a broad spectrum of athletes, from those who prefer the social aspects of membership, to athletes aiming to make a university-level team. At the time of the study, this club team had 60 members and 120 in its LTS programming. One of its strengths is that it has largely unfettered access to its own pool, a tremendous benefit in a city with overcrowded facilities. The athletes and coach noted that this access allows the club to ensure that athletes are able to complete the requisite training session and still accommodate school, work, or other athlete conflicts. Further, given the club's position with a broader club environment, athletes have access to better training equipment, dry land training with personal trainers, and a higher coach-athlete ratio; all aspects valued by parents and athletes. A number of athletes on the team spoke of highly valuing "club convenience" (Stephan, Reto).

Manta also has an informal relationship that enables it to share pool time and workouts with another club at a larger downtown facility. This arrangement allows the Manta athletes, to train with higher calibre athletes in a larger Olympic size pool on occasion. Athletes noted that because Manta is a small club, there can be a lack of appropriate training partners. Unlike many clubs in the city, that focus on placing their athletes on university teams, Manta's goal is to coach every athlete into their final year of high school, while supporting those athletes with university aspirations. Athletes train between ten and seventeen hours per week and most participate in other sports, particularly on school teams (e.g., rugby, swimming, track and field, club soccer).

The athletes value the club's "laid back" atmosphere and flexible training program (Athlete Stephan). Swimming with Manta was often viewed as more convenient for the family

as well because the private club played a central role in the family's daily activities. As a result, athletes enjoyed convenient access to food, recovery (massage), and a range of cross sport opportunities, while parents and other siblings could enjoy a healthy and more balanced lifestyle than merely supporting their swimming child. And perhaps because of this "swimming isn't everything" environment, only about half of club Manta swimmers reported an interest in swimming at the varsity level, while some mentioned a desire to lifeguard, swim 'Masters' level, or do triathlon after high school (Swimmer Reto). The club's (coaches, athletes and parents) 'generalized' approach to training undoubtedly enabled athletes to pursue a broader range of interests and activities, with the effect of lowering chances for success in the pool. This trade-off appeared to be agreeable to Manta parents who encouraged their children to devote more attention to school and to focus less on their athletic pursuits. Travis (athlete) felt that "swimming less seriously is reflected in our academics" and then shared that it was his impression that some athletes on larger teams were not concerned with education.

Although the Manta club does not have the performance pedigree of its local competition, it has had a few standout swimmers. And while, current team members were not necessarily motivated to follow in the footsteps of the club's most successful athletes, they were encouraged to know that the club had produced an Olympic Trials calibre swimmer. In fact, given its size, and flexible training program, young Manta swimmers benefitted greatly from "looking up to older swimmers on the team who motivate" (Travis). When asked what car best represented club Manta, the swimmers first identified its small stature, family-orientation, exclusivity and high cost before offering the SMART car, Mini Cooper and Volvo before agreeing upon a VW Westphalia as the vehicle that most embodied their club's character.

4.2.5 Crocs

The Crocs are the other municipal club run out of a private club. Its training structure is similar to the Manta. It is a small team, with a concentrated group of swimmers. One athlete is at the National level from a main group of 16 senior athletes. Like Manta, the team commits to the philosophy of supporting athletes in the pool through to high school graduation. Its goal is to place athletes on university teams, but coach Mandy noted that balancing this goal against

the significant 'off the deck' expectations placed on athletes by their parents is a major challenge. Recruitment is also an issue as non-members have not typically been allowed to compete for the club, and so the club suffers from the larger clubs, demographics. An inconsistent number of new swimmers hampers the club's feeder system a challenge not suffered by the city's larger clubs. The private club offers a broader sport program that allows non-member athletes to join teams in unique situations, but this has not yet happened for the swim program. Similar to club Manta, Coach Mandy described the Croc's unique benefits as: an ideal coach-athlete ratio, a private pool, and access to professional services within the club such as strength training. These benefits were confirmed by the swimmers who indicated that being a Croc meant access to dry land training and club services such as massage. Team fees total roughly \$1,900 per year, but there are the ancillary costs of competing at provincial and national meets, and membership dues to the private club. Athletes in the eldest group train 13 to 16 hours per week, across eight workouts and two dry land sessions.

The Crocs main competition is team Manta and other small clubs, such as those in surrounding cities. The main feature that differentiated the Crocs from Manta (and every other team in the study) is that it does not run under the guidance of a parent board of directors. The Crocs are part of the aquatics department at this private club, and it answers to this hierarchy. This creates challenges for the team as the environment is not quite as accommodating as the Manta's. Further, Coach Mandy noted an effort was required to "change the mentality of parents" as volunteering was rare. Parents tend to view the club as a sport program (like a spin class or dance class within the club), and not as a sport team, so parent expectations relative to volunteer/support was much different than other club parents. Similar to Club Manta, the Crocs also have an informal relationship with one of the club's training out of the main downtown centre to conduct some workouts in the larger Olympic-sized pool.

Similar to the Turtles, swimmers and parents alike appreciated the proximity of the Croc's pool/facility, as most club members live within walking distance, prompted in part by the fact that the club is a nucleus for other activities, fitness, business networking, social events, and dining. Swimmer Alicia closely described how "part of your social life is at the (private

club).” Location and convenience are critical to acquiring and retaining athletes in the coach’s eyes; “Proximity is a HUGE reason why we get kids started” (Mandy). About half of the athletes reported participation in sports outside of swimming, such as high school athletics and club soccer. All participants attended private schools, and athletes felt that the club accommodated their academic and other interests. Although every participant planned to attend university, none were committed to continuing their swim career at that level. Swimmer Linda captured most of her teammate’s sentiment when she said that “I feel like as I get older performance is less important to me than it used to be because I am focusing on other things.” The current Croc athletes were unaware of either the history of the club or its prior development of any accomplished swimmers. They felt that the club had not produced many strong swimmers and when they had, they were quickly lost to other clubs. In contemplating what kind of car best characterized the Crocs team, athletes remarked the club’s sturdiness, femininity, small size, style, and high expense arose. They felt a Cadillac Escalade best represented their club. Participants were aware, and displeased, that athletes from other clubs viewed them as “snobby rich kids” (Alicia).

4.2.6 Speed

Club Speed is a mid-size team, training primarily out of the city’s main downtown facility. Although not as big as the Sharks, Pirates, or Turtles, it consistently produces swimmers that are competitive at the national level. The club was initially formed after two community clubs amalgamated and rather than relocate, Club Speed runs two programs outside of the main pool, at a small community pool and a municipal pool. When an athlete progresses to a higher level, they introduce more training sessions at the main centre. Athletes at the competitive level devote 15 to 18 hours per week to training, including dry land sessions, across 8 workouts. Speed has 80 swimmers aged nine to seventeen, and a total of 113 competitive swimmers. Its LTS program has an additional 167 participants. At present, only one athlete partakes in a sport outside of swimming, and while the club tries to accommodate this athlete, it is a burden. Proximity is a feature mentioned by team members, as it runs programs from three pools, all easy to access for the focus group’s athletes; “The pool that was closes to my

house was Team Speed so we joined that one” (Swimmer Justin). Though proximity becomes a challenge eventually when swimmers are required to train under a different coach at a new pool. Membership costs are about \$2,050 or higher and meet fees and travel typically add another \$1,600 to \$2,000 per year.

Athletes on Club Speed acknowledged their parent’s willingness to drive, officiate, and pay for their swim experience and yet none reported overly aggressive expectations. For example, Oscar (athlete) described his parents, stating that they “make me stay honest ... think of what (I) want to achieve.” The athletes felt fortunate to swim for a small club as it offered a different pathway. They felt they matured quickly as younger athletes look up to them, so leadership roles are defined earlier. Often these leadership/mentorship roles took place informally whereas in others they occurred more formally in coaching roles. As Speed is a strong community-based program, the athletes expressed some sadness in being spread across three pools, which “breaks the club up” (Oscar), although the geographically dispersed nature of the club does help improve access and reduce proximity challenges. An inherent danger associated with having athletes training at three different locations, is that it can be difficult to offer a consistent program with equal attention given to all swimmers. To illustrate, the club faced an internal coup a few years ago; with many athletes joining a new club, a minority of swimmers from one pool disbanding to create their own club, and the head coach nearly removed in a swim mutiny.

Despite Speed’s moderate size, the club consistently produces a number of elite athletes who achieve at the university level, and some who represent Canada in international swimming. For instance, one of Speed’s alumni is currently a national team member, widely regarded as the nation’s fastest swimmer in that event. However, no one mentioned club pedigree as an incentive for joining (Swimmer Tino noted “When I joined I was unaware of (past swimmers), but when I learned it was like cool” and Oscar felt that “It’s not necessary for a club to have a rich history for it to be good”). Interestingly, in describing Club Speed as a car, they settled on these qualities: good, reliable, compact, not “show-boaty” (Oscar) and modest,

it may be no frills but gets the job done. They decided that the Honda Civic perfectly captured the club's image.

4.2.7 Marlins

The Marlins also train out of the city's primary Olympic pool. Its younger athletes train a short distance away at the community pool and it uses that youth program as a feeder for its senior youth athletes. The Marlins is a medium-sized club consisting of about 45 athletes in the 13-18yr age group, (with 186 athletes in total), of which 18 are at the AGN or Senior National level. While it does not have the depth of athletes or the level of performance of the Sharks or Turtles, it is producing elite athletes. Swimmers in the eldest group train about 18 hours per week across 8 workouts, which includes dry land sessions, and compete in about 10 meets. Yearly fees lie between \$2,000 and \$3,000 for these athletes depending on the specific group they are in. Total expenses can reach \$10,000 once meets, travel and training camps are included.

Coach Larry says the Marlins are a "regional club, but set up for elite performance," meaning he accepts any swimmer, but has the capacity to support university- and national-track swimming. Coach Larry remarked numerous times that the Marlins are family-oriented and value school and university (preferably to swim, but absolutely for education). Parent Helen appreciated the "balanced" atmosphere, and that "when (they) have to study for a test, he lets them go." High school athletes are only allowed to swim for the team for a maximum of four years, to insure that Marlins' athletes graduate in a timely manner, something that may not be true at some of the other competitive clubs in town. The club values education and perceives swimming as a valuable component in that journey. The head coach and club structure highly encourage athletes to experience their best years of swimming while attending university. The Marlins club is performance-oriented, but it is characterized by a membership that believes in its coach's university-level swim philosophy.

More than half of the study's participants had moved to the Marlins from another club, which spoke both to the dissent in other clubs and the attractiveness of the Marlins. Proximity

is less valued than at other clubs, with many members commuting a considerable distance. The team members value their coach as a positive role model, and a training style unique from other clubs in that it focuses on all strokes (rather than specializing early). As it is a mid-sized club, the participants are a tighter group who appreciate the club's positive, upbeat environment that is simultaneously relaxed and yet allows for hard training. The athletes felt their small group size created a better 'on deck' mood. Each athlete aspired to swim at the university level. When describing the club, they felt the Toyota RAV 4 best captured the Marlin's qualities through characteristics of durability, comfort, accommodation, simplicity (less fancy), while remaining "nice" (Joseph).

Helen's child left one of the large clubs after five years with that team. She described the transition from 10 workouts a week to 8, an acceptance of education as a "basic need," and a part of the child's development that worked in concert with training and a better relationship with the coach and team mates as the primary reasons for relocating. While switching teams after five years was difficult, Helen described the previous club as "unhealthy/toxic," a place where her child was constantly sad. For two years she pleaded with her child to consider moving from the former club, a place she described by stating that "if you are unsuccessful, you are not liked." Coming from a communist country, she made a point of saying that "this is a free country, so we moved." She felt the Marlins offered a "really balanced" program. Her appreciation for the Marlins' qualities highlights the strengths of the club, where education is valued and strong leadership lies in a charismatic coach. Despite training in a central location, the club's qualities outweigh the considerable commute the family makes from the city's outskirts.

Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1 Emergent Themes Identified

Five interrelated themes emerged from this research that illustrated the evaluative process families employed in their search for a competitive sport club. These themes also brought attention to common weaknesses in the marketing of club sports: ineffective segmentation, targeting, and positioning, and ineffective internal and external communications. As a result of these ineffective or non-existent marketing practices, swimmers and their families reported struggles finding a club that best aligned with their desired sport experience.

5.1.1 The Youth Club Sport Marketing Mix

Athletes and parents not only value, but were found to actively look for a swim club that not only preaches, but that more importantly practices, the type of values that align most closely with those of the family. To this end, five factors emerged from the focus-groups and interviews that influenced the club selection process. These five emergent themes were viewed as potential segmentation variables in that participants referenced each differently when describing 'my club' versus 'that club.' To this end, athletes and families distinguished each club based on factors such as: commuting time, personality, reputation and philosophy of coach and cost to participate. Specifically, the following Five Ps – Performance, Price, Proximity, Pedigree, and Principal (coach) – were found to define the 'genetic' makeup of a swim club, and reflect perceptual map dimensions that can be used to define the swim club market space.

Price and proximity are straight forward dimensions and were most commonly referenced by participants in terms of high/low cost and near/far location. Performance referred to a club's commitment to achievement, and the speed at which this achievement was expected. Those clubs with a lower performance orientation are typically no less committed to success, but their performance time horizon (short-term vs. long-term) might differ significantly. Performance then describes the difference in the immediacy of success expectations, with some clubs creating a sense of urgency or pressure to perform with athletes at a young age. Those clubs with a higher performance orientation are keen to generate

excellence in a shorter period of time. And like clubs, athletes can have a high or low performance orientation. Neither orientation is 'good' or 'bad,' but rather simply a different club philosophy and a different definition of success. Some clubs commit to a rounded individual where competitive swimming is one aspect of a wholesome lifestyle and others more narrowly commit to an Olympic pathway. Performance captures this unique orientation for a given club.

The fourth theme, Principal, refers to the club's strategic leadership namely, the head coach. Each coach has a different philosophy and approach to the sport. This study was not concerned with a coach's ability as that is difficult to measure and is significantly affected by the alignment of athlete-coach values. Rather this study was concerned with the strategy employed by each coach, and is most commonly defined by their philosophy on athlete expectations, their long term view of swimming, and the role that academics play within each athlete's sport experience.

Pedigree is defined as "distinguished, excellent, or pure ancestry" (Random House Dictionary, 2012). The theme arose in interviews and focus groups when successful past swimmers within a club were mentioned. The history of each club's high achieving athletes emerged strongly in some focus groups (especially for older athletes who had changed clubs).

5.1.2 Fit

The extent of fit between participants and their club is critical to long term participation, success, and fun. Fit or alignment refers to the extent to which a club's philosophy - as relayed and practiced by a coach - is congruent with the philosophy of the athlete and/or parent. High attrition rates attest to the importance of fit, as do the number of participants in this study who had or were considering a club change in the future. For instance, Helen regrettably described her daughter's experience as one dimensional: "from ten to fourteen, she had no life. She passed young life." Chris, an elite swimmer, noted that for athletes or parents struggling to find the right club or feeling trapped by the current club:

The worst part of this is that other options exist. There are other clubs that are much cheaper, without necessarily sacrificing the quality of the program, or in some instances even other sports, where expenditures are more transparent and parents might actually have a more significant say in how the child’s sport experience evolves.

5.2 A Thematic Description of Each Team

The aforementioned five themes shape club image and thus influence their ability to attract those athletes (and families) that are best aligned; university-oriented swimmers versus elite, public transit-reliant families versus free-to-travel, peripheral offerings (private club) versus singular offering (public clubs), and so on. The table below depicts how each club is positioned on these themes according to information gleaned from the focus groups and interviews. They do not represent a better club or worse club, but simply capture sentiment based on it participants. Each theme is ranked on a scale of Low, Moderate, High, Very High signifying its relevance to the club ethos, based on an interpretation from the interviews and focus groups.

Table 5.1 Five Themes Influencing Membership in Seven Swim Clubs

	Sharks	Pirates	Turtles	Manta	Crocs	Speed	Marlins
Performance	Very High	Moderate	Very High	Low	Low	High	Moderate
Price	Very High	Moderate	Very High	Very High	Very High	Moderate	High
Principal	Very High	Moderate	High	Low	Low	High	Moderate
Proximity	Low	Moderate	High	Very High	Very High	Moderate	Moderate
Pedigree	Very High	High	Very High	Moderate	Low	Moderate	Moderate

Performance: Low (competitive, longer time horizon) – Very High (elite, shorter time horizon)

Price: Low (low price) – Very High (high price)

Principal: Low (broad view of swimming – inclusive mindset) – Very High (narrow view of swimming – exclusive mindset)

Proximity: Low (proximity is not valued) – Very High (proximity is valued)

Pedigree: Low (pedigree is not valued or celebrated) – Very High (pedigree is valued and celebrated)

5.2.1 Performance

Not surprisingly, two teams emerged as strongly performance oriented; the Sharks and the Turtles. Despite this, each team has little else in common. Each trains in a different community in its own 50 meter pool, attracting a different type of membership. Members pay the highest fees in these two clubs. One club, the Sharks, is elite-oriented and enterprising. The second, the Turtles, is elite-oriented, but focused on developing athletes for its varsity program and attracts families who value its location. Parent Michelle noted that “families need to find what works for them for the moment. And I think there are different options for sure; super competitive, moderately competitive, and not so competitive at all.”

Chris described the pressure of an extreme performance orientation, if it’s not completely aligned with a family and athlete’s goals. Chris had strong concerns with the “individualist” and “micro culture” values that these clubs and, more specifically, the coaches promote:

Take you to the Olympics, rather than train with one of the best teams or best training groups. I feel like what is being sold, is what the club can do for the individual, where the emphasis is not at all on the TEAM, but strictly on the individual.

Chris felt this “exclude(d) the lower classes of society” and noted that some athletes pay as much as \$800 a month for this training opportunity. Interestingly, the two clubs who value

excellence the most are the clubs that most often had one stay at home parent. Michelle of the Turtles and Marc of the Sharks both noted how critical it was to have one parent free. Michelle noted:

I think what's been a major key for our family is for the most part I've been a stay at home mom and when I have worked it's been from home or part time. I think that that's been key because it frees up to do those early morning swim drives and to be here 3:15 to get them back to the pool.

And Coach Hector described a common familial model he observes on his team as:

The father usually worked and the mother stayed home. As a consequence of that we've raised fees and lowered volunteer commitment. Because parents don't think the incremental time isn't worth the incremental dollar.

And the participants suggested that managing the competing demands of life and swimming largely succeeded because one parent had the means to help manage those tasks.

The majority of other clubs were less performance driven, and pursued different approaches to swimmer development, ultimately these methods appeared to be a better fit for many families and athletes. It was found that a spectrum of coaching/training philosophies existed within this metropolitan area, with some clubs doing a better job of communicating these differences than others. Performance is a key component to the swim experience, so perhaps those clubs less focused on immediate results are hesitant to communicate this. However, there are other ways to showcase this in a positive light, and clubs such as the Pirates and Marlins were successful in doing so. For instance, promoting training flexibility and accommodating academic and other athletic demands while still offering a means to pursue performance level swimming in the future appears to be a lucrative service offering.

5.2.2 Price

As with any leisure pursuit, price is a factor in determining membership, however, in competitive sports price is seen as an investment whereby the potential return is weighed against the ability to pay. Here the interviews were found to mirror prior research, insofar as

income appears to be an antecedent in the formation of particular club structures (Jaramilo, Kempf, & Moizeau, 2003) and that (financial) inequality is a major factor of segmentation. Further, Jaramilo et al. (2003) argued that as the proportion of wealthy members increase, club size decreases and that where family incomes are relatively equal, clubs will also be relatively equal in size. This is the case for the Crocs and Manta, both small costly clubs. And interestingly, the most moderately priced club actually evolved from a YMCA program.

Overall, the swim community is composed of wealthy families, and yet the range of wealth is considerable. A family that can afford \$3,000 a year for their child to swim is vastly different than a family that can afford \$15,000 per child, and thus youth athletes are limited by their family's wealth and/or commitment to their athletic pursuit. And while it was evident that the clubs with the highest membership costs had more wealthy families (because they were members of a private club or drove costly vehicles etc.), those clubs with lower entry barriers, were not devoid of wealthy families. Rather, these families were seen to place greater value on offerings other than just performance, such as: coaching, proximity, or perhaps pre-existing friendships. Price, even for the wealthy, is a consideration and many parents described their search for "value" when choosing a swim club.

5.2.3 Principal

Principal is the perceived contribution a club's coach has on the club, but is the coach a deal maker or deal breaker when selecting a team? While there are a number of considerations the potential club member evaluates, the coach/coaching philosophy is arguably the most interpersonal measure (friends of the athlete/family aside). For example, swimmers were found to have remained with a coach even after the coach changed clubs, demonstrating that the coach's influence is considerable. There is a transition period for most swimmers when they decide to commit to a particular swimming pathway, whether it's elite swimming or otherwise, and they measure their current setting against other options. The coach influences this decision, attracting certain swimmers, and dissuading others from joining. Even in cases where a swimmer joins a club through its LTS programming, the coach influences whether to stay or leave. Healthy competitiveness between clubs and amongst all members is a good thing, but

negative sentiment from soured relationships emerged in many of the interviews and focus groups.

Principal reflects the coach's viewpoint of swimming within the broader responsibilities an athlete and family maintain through the course of the club career. It is not a reflection of good or bad coaching. Because the coach is such a strong determinant in selecting a club, that individual is a central figure in the value proposition. His or her philosophy, which will resonate through the club, should be a part of the messaging to potential new families, and part of the internal dialogue to maintain consistent rapport with current membership.

5.2.4 Proximity

Proximity is the simplest concept of the five, recognizing that the commute an athlete and/or family makes to participate, is a factor in the consideration to join. As a consideration of prospective members, promoting this aspect is a potentially strong influencer. For the sake of swimming, many past athletes have moved (alone or with their family), to get closer to a club's training environment. Conversely, at least one coach mentioned that he's respectfully dissuaded families from joining, because of the distance they'd be required to travel and the strain it would place on the family. In clubs such as the Sharks, location was not a determinant, as it attracts membership on other factors, and these other offerings significantly outweigh any inconveniences incurred due to a commute. Proximity was a perk for families that were lucky enough to live close to the club, while others were willing to adjust their lives accordingly. In other cases, particularly with the private clubs, proximity was a central concern.

5.2.5 Pedigree

Pedigree is a complex factor, but it is valuable in promoting a club's achievements and attracting members based on historical success. A history of performance (which can be promoted on different types of achievement) can strongly define a club in the eyes of prospective and current members. For instance the simple measures used by some clubs (e.g., a club record board on deck that swimmers walk past each workout), establishes a connection to the club's past, and strengthens current athletes commitment to the club's future

achievements. Swimmer Neil commented that his team has “this very handy club record board, (which I like) cause you’re always trying to see can I go that fast.”

Although some participants acknowledged that they were attracted by club’s past success prior to joining, about half either did not identify with or were unaware of their club’s pedigree prior to joining (“don’t know much about the history of the club” – Jason of team Speed). While a club’s pedigree may not influence all athletes/families equally, it can be persuasive in recruitment communication. Parents were generally found to be less concerned with pedigree, the exception being parents who themselves had previously been involved in competitive swimming. For “storied” clubs such as the Turtles, with a record for having produced Olympic calibre athletes, and even a few Olympic medals, pedigree was a significant factor in joining the club. Leveraging its historical achievements is a significant opportunity for the Turtles, their pool wall is decorated with years of Olympic Team Member banners and University swim championship banners. The Turtles are fortunate to have access to a university education in conjunction with its competitive swimming program (a pathway that hundreds of its alumni followed). Similarly, the Sharks have a pedigree of performance swimming and it does a commendable job of celebrating team and individual performances. Noting the number of athletes attending National level meets is a compelling feature. Smaller teams such as the Pirates and team Speed, which in some cases are developing swimmers up to the National team or Olympic level, have an opportunity to highlight the benefits of a small club environment that does not sacrifice the potential to achieve international level success.

Even clubs that lacked a history of elite performance were found to have a pedigree that might combine moderate levels of achievement (e.g., competing at reasonably high levels) with performance on other dimensions (e.g., fun environment, academic/competition balance). As a result, a club’s pedigree can transcend medals and speed in the water, and should be communicated to both prospective and current swimmers.

5.3 Swim Club Perceptual Mapping

Using Jacobs' (2007) performance-oriented continuum as a template, the following perceptual maps were generated from the interviews and focus groups where club performance, is mapped against the other four emergent decision criteria. This is a subjective reflection of the interview data, capturing the communities shared sense of each club:

Figure 5.1 Performance and Price Dimensions

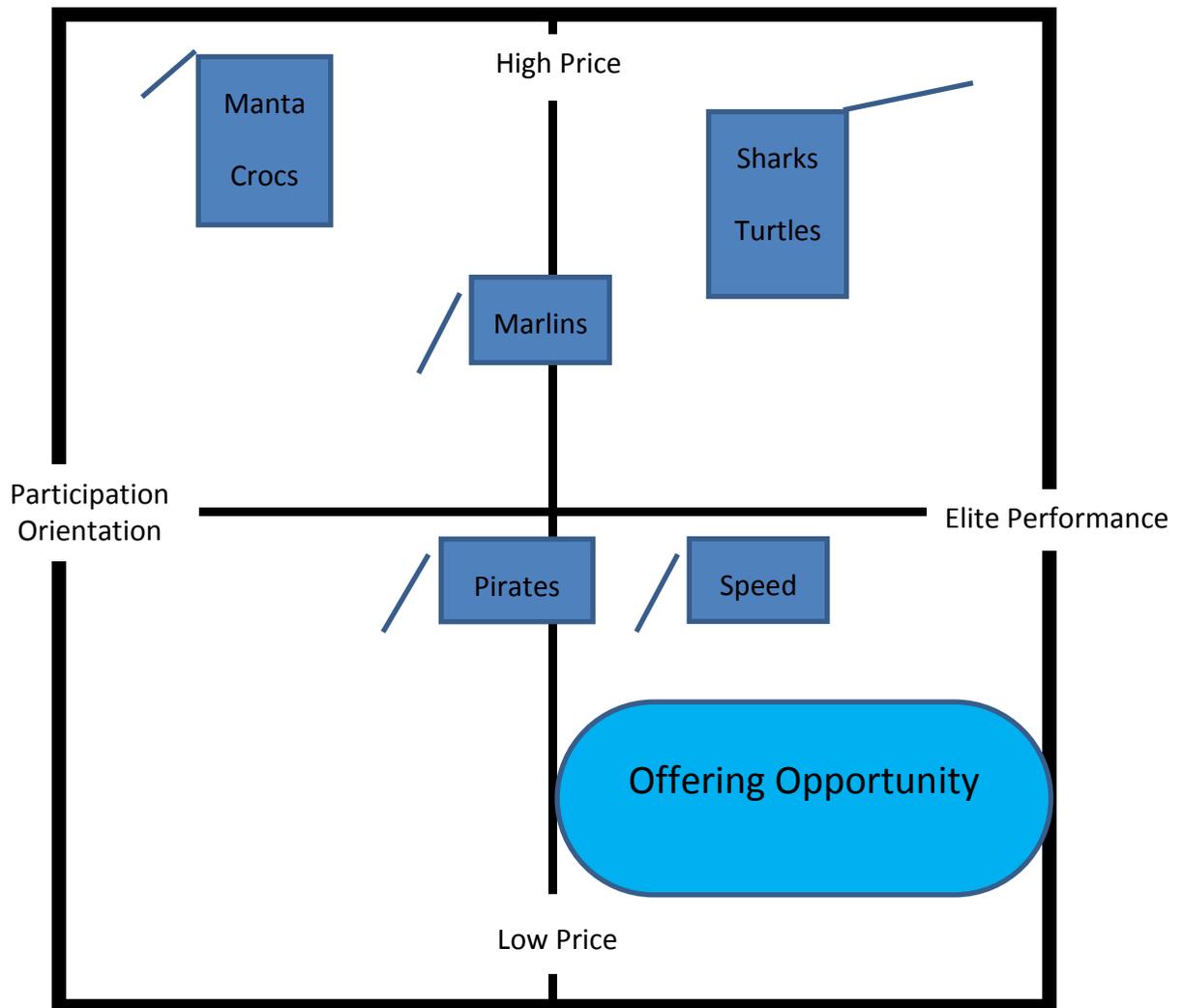


Figure 5.2 Performance and Principal Dimensions

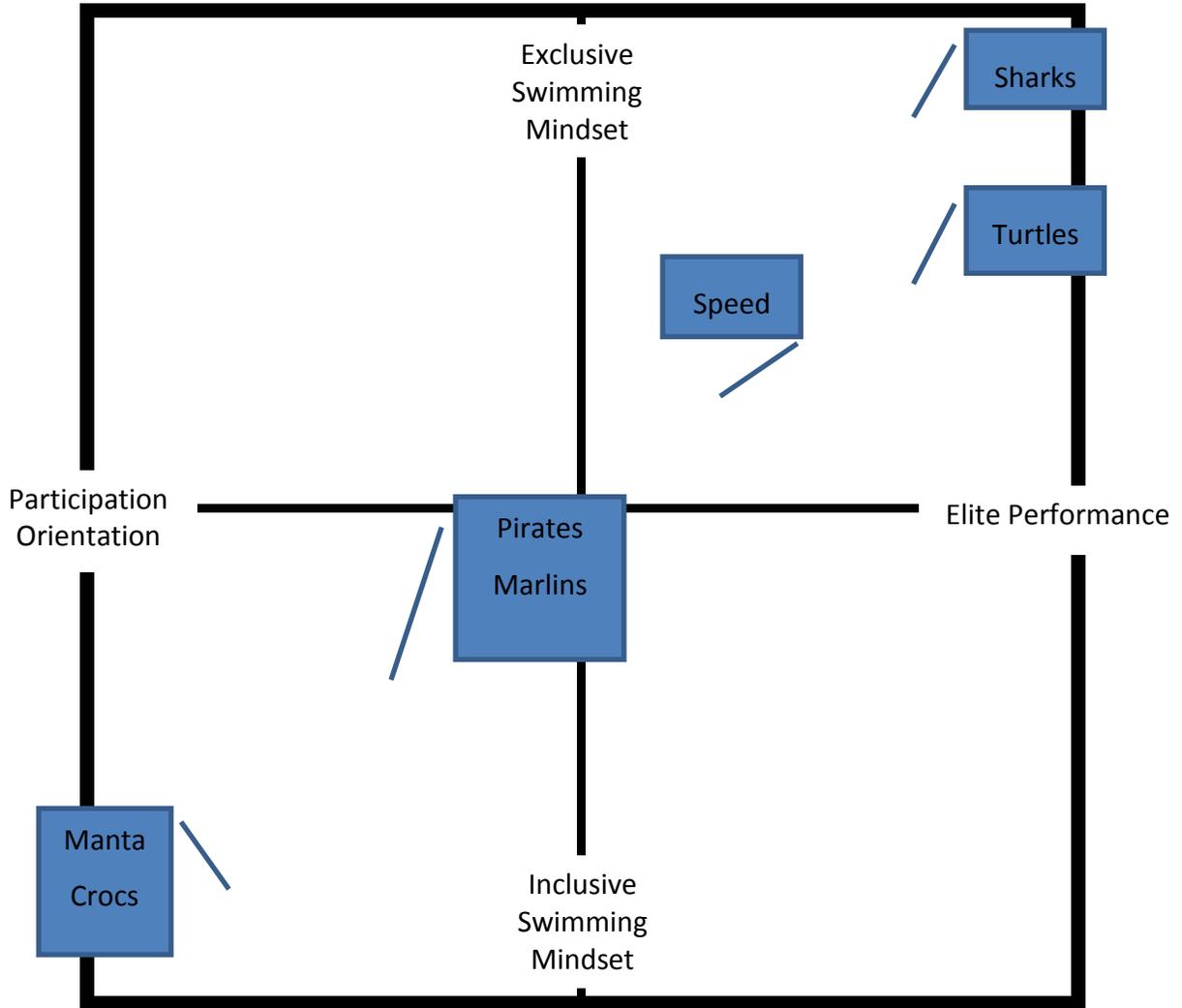


Figure 5.3 Performance and Proximity Dimensions

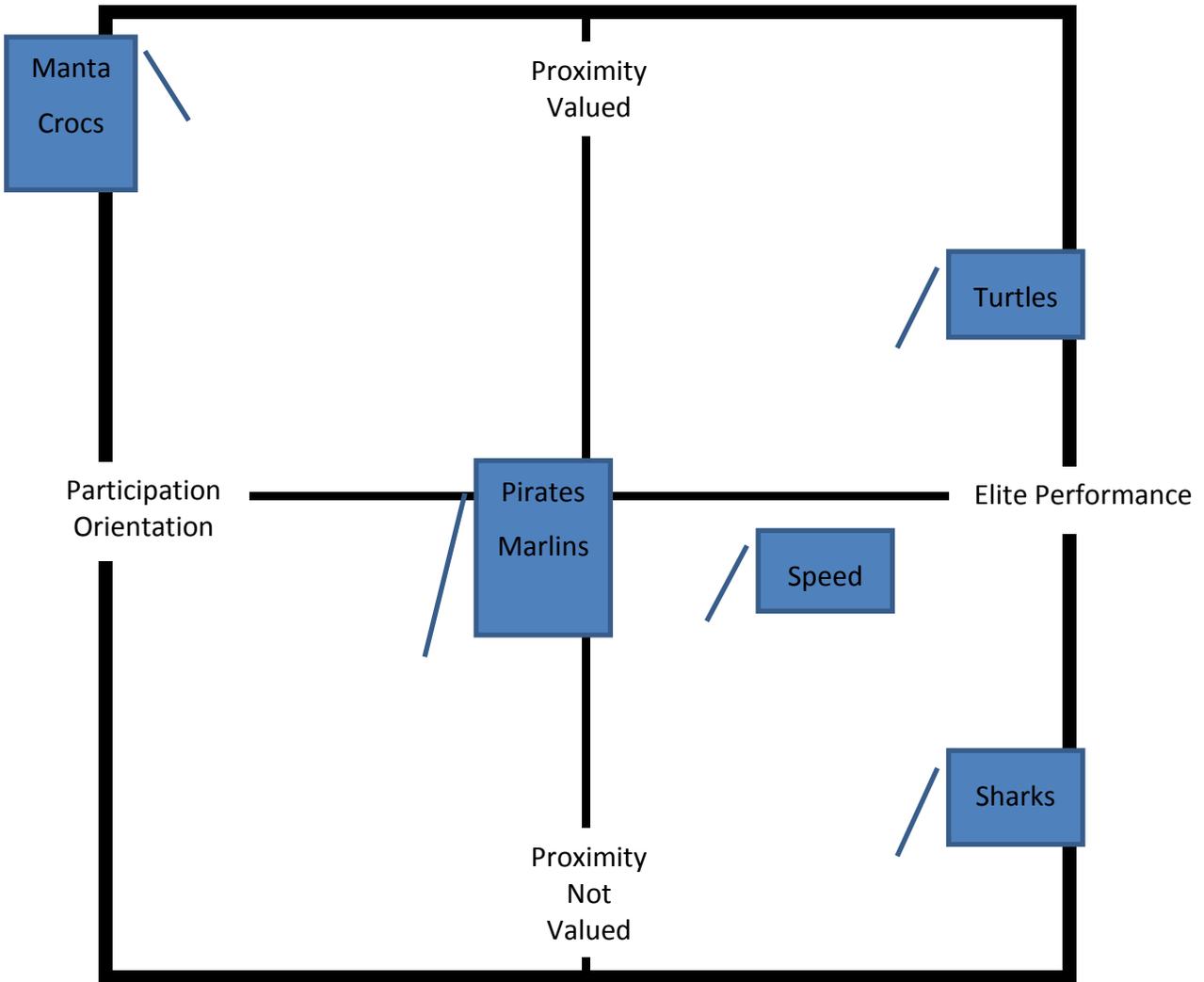
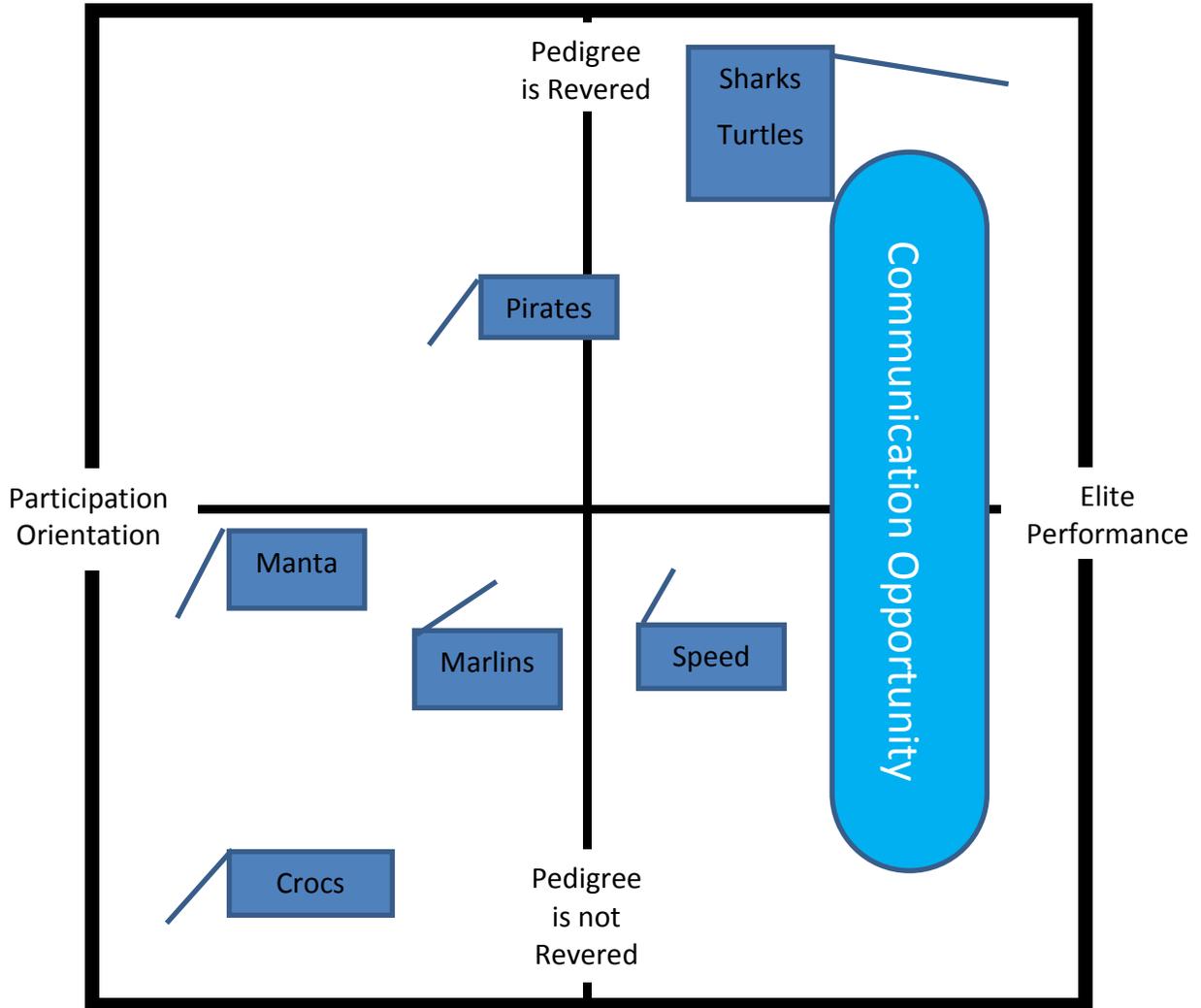


Figure 5.4 Performance and Pedigree Dimensions



5.4 Implications

5.4.1 Limitations

While the exploratory research objective is to garner an extensive understanding only possible through the depth interviews and focus groups employed, these methods present a number of challenges. The biggest challenge with focus groups was securing participation with the youth athletes that for ethics purposes had to be performed in a supervised environment. As a result, focus groups were hosted post-workout, so fatigue and hunger certainly were factors. Parents were keen to share their story, but often strained to be fully 'present' (with stressors of other children and the commute). Sometimes the focus groups would attract greater or fewer than the requested number of participants. Coaches enjoyed sharing their impression of the state of competitive swimming and the distinctions of their program, but they were the most biased participants.

Finally, as noted in Dorsch et al.'s (2009) research on child-to-parent socialization in sport, it is important to appreciate that the youth athletes examined in the current thesis are primarily from Caucasian, upper-middle class, suburban, nuclear families, who have the time and resources necessary to enable their child's youth sport experience. In particular, families in swimming tend to be affluent. For example, swimming households in the USA had a median income of \$85,000 which is above the 90th percentile (Dukes & Coakley, 2002). And based on the qualitative methodology employed, families in this study were appear to most often be intact, middle to upper class with white collar jobs that might further limit the conclusions that can be drawn from this youth sport context.

5.4.2 Sport Marketing Implications

This study drew upon the extant but limited research on youth club sport while contributing to the literature by examining the overlooked management and specifically marketing of youth club sports. While the study sought to highlight perceived market opportunities and redundancies in the club landscape, it also revealed club strengths and looked for evidence of a club mission, strategy, and the existence/communication of a unique

value proposition. Ultimately, this research sought evidence of an alignment between stakeholders and clubs, or at least the existence of common ground (consumer demand and club services/benefits) that could signal opportunities to reduce youth sedentary behaviour by improving attraction and retention (participation) rates and increasing elite performances. The ultimate consequence of greater athlete-club alignment is an enhanced club sport experience for athletes and a more effective and sustainable club structure. Dukes and Coakley (2002) argued that because of the structure of the average swim family and the typical private, performance-oriented sport club, it will be very difficult to make changes that encourage greater diversity (gender, race) of participation. The current thesis suggests that there may be some call for greater optimism than demonstrated by Dukes and Coakley (2002), but understanding the distinct needs of different consumer groups (segmentation), and then being able to develop, deliver and promote a club experience (marketing strategy) to satisfy a sufficiently-sized market segment is necessary. This research represents a first step towards this end.

De Knop et al. (1996) identified some of the obstacles to performance faced by sport clubs including, but not limited to: financial limitations, infrastructure restrictions, member attrition, and imperfect participation in board and coaching positions. Consistent with De Knop et al. (1996), each of these issues were revealed during the participant interviews and focus group discussions of the current study. In addition, this research revealed that while training methods and athlete performances have progressed steadily, the strategic management of these clubs has failed to keep pace. As a result, sport club offerings are often ambiguous, inconsistent, or not sufficiently differentiated in communications and delivery. Ideally a unique strategy or vision would drive the creation of a club, but the process is usually more reactive and far less strategic, lacking a long term focus. A club's orientation seems to be informally influenced by its founders (often adults who previously participated in the sport); the original head coach of the team, the era the team formed, or the neighbourhood it is located in. So despite the fact that distinct club types were identified (which is ideal as this means different consumer-types are served) these distinctions appear to have developed more often by

accident than by design. Interviews and focus groups revealed that while a club ethos was present, it was typically not well communicated and often in conflict with club practice, demands on parents, or some other element of the sport experience. To this end, participants revealed that there were clear opportunities to enhance the marketing and delivery of the club sport experience for all stakeholders.

The resulting lack of alignment between a club's desired market position and its ability to attract the desired youth athlete market may be a contributing factor in the negative effects of youth sport participation (e.g., burnout, injury, and increasing attrition) as athletes find themselves in a club situation that is ill-suited to their ability, values, or goals. Raglin and Morgan (1989) for instance indicated that 90% of competitive swimmers experience burnout during their career, not once but multiple times, and further stated that this sport is characterized by more athlete burnout than any other. While there is no empirical evidence to suggest burnout is fully responsible for increasing athlete attrition rates, it is no doubt a contributing factor. Increasing attrition rates for example is of considerable concern as evidenced by USA Swimming commissioning a study in 2002 to identify ways to increase and diversify the participation base in its clubs (Dukes & Coakley, 2002). In an increasingly competitive landscape, it is best for the club and customer that a clearly articulated product is offered and delivered.

5.4.3 Segmentation – Targeting – Positioning

Past studies have found that most sport organizations implement segmentation practices, but the voluntary sector (youth sport) needs to address this more fully (Weed et al., 2005). A few quasi segmentation models were introduced in Chapter 2, but until the current study no market-oriented approach to club segmentation existed. To succeed, it is imperative that sport service organizations identify the needs and wants of its potential consumers (Taks & Scheerder, 2006). In order to attract and retain membership that aligns with core capacities, new clubs entering the club-space should fill gaps in the market while existing clubs should ensure their offerings are sufficiently differentiated from competitive offerings, and on dimensions valued by the market.

Taks and Scheerder (2006) propose *usage* and *behaviour* to segment the sports market. Their usage recommendations are the frequency of participation (week, month, year), the intensity of participation (the number of hours spent on active sports), the diversity of participation (number of sports practiced), the context of participation (organised versus casual), and the different sports practiced (sports preferences). The authors used this data in conjunction with demographic, socio-economic, and psychographic data such as “gender, age, school programme, socio-economic status and parental sports participation” (Taks and Scheerder, 2006, p. 115) to create a perceptual map of the universe of youth sport options. Here, club swimming was identified as having a high degree of cultural capital and a moderately high level of sport participation or commitment, although this latter categorization is in question given that swimming is considered a time-intensive, year round sport. While informative this approach obviously lacks utility when applied more narrowly to an individual sport.

5.4.4 Club Typology

A typology is a classification system that’s structure is determined by concepts placed along a continuum (Patton, 2002). From the data that is collected, patterns may emerge. Those patterns are examined to see if subgroups or types are represented, and if so, if the pattern holds in different settings (Bazeley, 2009, p. 6). A structure of the clubs in this city emerged following the interviews and focus groups, based on the five themes.

For each club, an early step toward better delivery requires a segmentation of the market into heterogeneous groupings. In the past this has been an informal practice if it took place at all (there is value in pursuing a specific type of swimmer). Targeting these individuals brings many benefits; lower attrition rates, greater experiences and performances, and continuity for the team and coach. To target effectively each club must articulate its qualities – what differentiates it from its competitors, positioning itself on certain traits – and be prepared to compete for the right talent based on those qualities. The following potential positions emerged from the interviews and subsequent perceptual maps:

- i. *Elite Track* (Essentially occupied by the Sharks and Turtles)
- ii. *Competitive University Track* (Occupied by the Marlins and Speed, and somewhat the Pirates)
- iii. *Balanced Competitive Track* (Somewhat occupied by the Manta and Crocs)
- iv. *Value-oriented Track* (Somewhat occupied by the Pirates, but essentially vacant)
- v. *Comprehensive Elite Track* (Vacant)
- vi. *Niche Track* (SWAD, Multi-sport, Gender specific) (Vacant)

Inevitably, a degree of overlap exists and there are certainly other options. These six positions offer a marked difference from each other for attracting a specific clientele and are discussed within the four strategies that follow.

5.4.5 Four Strategies

By adapting Ansoff's (1957) Product-Market Growth Matrix, four strategies arise that address the gap in programming delivery (Appendix G). These recommendations offer feasible, actionable approaches for strategic growth while working within the infrastructure limitations faced by each club (e.g., pool access, location).

5.4.5.1 Refine Club Messaging

Market Penetration - present product, present market

The first strategy is to refine the way the club communicates its offerings to the market. An assortment of club types (and potential club types) emerged following the interviews and focus groups. Although each club is evaluated on the five primary factors, it is more accurate to say that each club is evaluated on the perception of those factors and that perception is built on its strength in communicating all the benefits that it offers. Although each club offers a variety of sport experiences, it seems that clubs seldom employ strategies to differentiate themselves from their competitors through purposeful communication despite the fact that they have unique market offerings with respect to price, elite performance, academic encouragement, and so on. It appears from the interviews that the onus is on the market to do

the due diligence required to learn about clubs rather than for clubs to proactively market themselves. One obvious, but often overlooked communication framework is the Long Term Athlete Development model that most clubs follow to some degree. The LTAD is increasingly a benchmark of competence and expertise, and every club will benefit from prioritizing this in its messaging.

If a club is not willing to define or distinguish itself the market will correctly or incorrectly define it for them. Unfortunately, most of the clubs in the current study appeared to have unwittingly taken this “hands off” approach to market positioning. However, a concerted effort to set market expectations for athletes and parents would undoubtedly lead to more successful attraction, enhanced satisfaction and decreased attrition rates. Messaging must capture a club’s unique and differentiating features (through its website, printed materials, online advertising, and all promotional material). At present, in this metropolitan market, this integrated approach to marketing communications is rare with the Sharks the lone team presenting a consistent message. The Turtles and Pirates have some regularity in the communication of their unique value proposition, but most clubs can significantly improve, if not begin to develop, their communication strategy. Showcasing a club’s unique value proposition to prospective athletes and their families should be the priority, with an emphasis on dimensions such as coaching philosophy, membership/sundry fees, complementary training offerings and other differentiating traits.

5.4.5.2 Fulfill Unmet Needs

Product Development - new product, present market

The second strategy is to fill unmet needs according to the matrices. The findings suggest that some clubs will benefit from differentiation, as four distinct club types exist (roughly as follows: Sharks/Turtles, Pirates, Speed/Marlins, and Manta/Crocs). The Manta and Crocs, and Team Speed and Marlins, respectively, have a high degree of overlap with each other. These four teams segment on limited factors, leading to confusion on their offerings and

that makes it difficult for each club to attract “good” membership as the four club’s competencies and qualities are indiscriminate.

There are two gaps in delivery (where unmet needs exist). The first is the comprehensive-elite club (school plus all peripheral services). The second is a price-conscious, competitive club. And then there are a near infinite variety of offerings along the economy-prestige continuum, as Coach Hector said there is, “always room for another program.”

A comprehensive-elite program would strive to offer the most complete program servicing to a swimmer. As Coach Mandy said in her interview; “If there was a pool that opened up run by one person or one program, I could see a swim school going in there.” Similar programming exists in other sports, particularly in hockey. In this setting, athletes are provided the basis for performance training, as well as all support services. The services include physiotherapy, massage, sport psychology, and nutrition guidance. This type of programming not only includes but is oriented around the athlete’s educational needs, and a coordinated approach to both scholastic and athletic development. An emerging service that is popular in some youth sports, the comprehensive-elite track has yet to gain traction in Canadian youth swimming (although some athletes relocate for the same reason and adjust their lives to work with a particular club in a similar arrangement). From tennis academies in Florida, junior hockey in rural Canada, to the National Ski Academy in Collingwood Ontario, a model for comprehensive programming for athletic youth is already in place elsewhere. Further, as first suggested by Lally and Kerr (2008), the club may develop stronger relationships with university programs to liaise the transition ‘up,’ and offer exit strategies such as pre-retirement planning to liaise the transition ‘out’ of sport. This programming is professional and expensive, as evidenced by the National Ski Academy that can cost parents \$35,000 per year (Marr, 2012).

As it already exists in other sports, and occupies a vacant area of the current market offering, it is likely that the market would respond positively to a comprehensive-elite product offering. At present, families and athletes are forced to manage the demands of a comprehensive-elite program on their own, relocating either the entire family or boarding their children in a city with the school-swim club experience they are looking for. While, sport

schools focusing on niche markets tailored toward young, elite athletes have emerged over the course of the past decade, there is still nothing available on the scale that might be required to satisfy market/competitive goals. Unfortunately, this type of programming requires an immense budget and infrastructure and will take time to emerge. With expert leadership and world class coaching, it is a legitimate future offering, as many of the initial components are already established. Obviously, both tennis and hockey have professional pathways in place, fostering their establishment. Given its unique challenges, a made for swimming solution will be required, but a few of the coaches interviewed for the current study spoke about this as a project they anticipate materializing. Unlike other sports, the end goal is far less lucrative (i.e., no professional leagues to support), so any program will have to lean heavily on parental funding, sponsorships and national sport funding agencies.

The second offering is a highly price-conscious but competitive swim program (see Figure 5.1). None of the extant teams appear to compete on price, despite the existence of the large variance in the membership fees and participation costs associated with each team. This creates an opportunity for a new team to establish itself as a price leader (or a current team to shift its brand). Even wealthy parents are discerning spenders, a fact bolstered by the current financial climate, and a city that has a very high cost of living. Creating a 'lean' program that is competitive, but removes the peripheral offerings such as dry land, massage, large coaching staffs, and so on, may be an enticing product for some families especially in the early non-committed years of a child's involvement. Such a program might ultimately provide value as a feeder/development club while providing considerable value to lower income families, multisport athletes, or families with multiple swimmers.

A third offering from the interviews is club training and competition that caters to the gender considerations within sport. The literature shows that boys and girls experience sport differently. Tailoring a program to those different experiences could be worthwhile especially in light of the fact that female participation rates in youth sport lag behind those of males. Comments by young female swimmers such as Paige's (and supported by her team mates); "Cause she's a girl (Coach Mandy), we can talk to her more about stuff" validate exploring this

new approach. Seefeldt and Ewing (1997, p. 3) argued that the lack of equal opportunities for girls to participate in sport programming is one of the “most pervasive and devastating” forms of sexism today. In addition, Taks and Scheerder (2006) suggested that it might also be easier to target girls as they are attracted to a wider variety of sports than boys, and in Canada where hockey and winter sports dominate the popular culture, swimming is a somewhat less attractive sport option. Of the teams participating in the study, only one had a female head coach (her senior team members were also exclusively female). Only one other team in the study had a female in any type of leadership position on the team. In fact, the absence of females in leadership/mentorship position begs the question: do girls leave swimming, or sport in general, because it is dominated by male figures?

Given the existence of gender-specific activities, clubs, and schooling options elsewhere there is quite possibly an opportunity for a club(s) to seize upon gender-programming as its point of differentiation. For instance, a team could offer training that is divided into gender groups either on a full or part time basis, based on the belief being that by attending to unique gender training / lifestyle needs would lead to a better experience, greater commitment and improved performance. To this end, even at the elite NCAA level of swimming, many teams choose to have men and women train separately. Of course, the downside to this is that mixed-gender sport is a great environment to socialize kids into the ‘real world.’ Offering it part time may be the best approach. The second version is to create, and celebrate, a mixed coaching staff. This is good for the sport, and its participants. Many athletes are more comfortable communicating with one gender as opposed to the other. A mixed environment also socializes athletes in a context that appreciates and respects direction from either a male or female coach.

5.4.5.3 Plant a Seed

Market Development – present product, new market

To expand the primary market for competitive swimming, clubs must create opportunities to attract individuals to the sport who would not otherwise want to or be able to

participate. For instance, many competitive swimmers today were first introduced to the sport through Learn-to-Swim (LTS) programs which have become ubiquitous. In other instances, athletes join competitive programs as a complement to their multi- sport training program. Triathletes for example often swim competitively as a means to improve their swim technique, stamina and to gain access to the scarcity of available pool time.

LTS programs were an early and highly successful approach to market development. To reach growth and performance goals, all of the clubs in the study recognize that LTS programming is necessary. Now that this programming is so common, further creative approaches are needed to attract young athletes that are either unaware of the merits or who lack access (i.e., financially, transportation) to competitive swimming. There are other avenues to new markets; a wider catchment for recruitment, traditionally non-swimming segments of the population and pre-LTS athletes. Widening the catchment refers to the athletes that are being missed in the communication strategies, such as high school swimmers who are competitive, but have not yet made a commitment to year-round competition. There are also new markets made up of (typically) lower socio-economic status athletes and younger athletes. If this study is representative of clubs in most cities, participants come from families that range from stable middle-class to highly wealthy, and there is a limited participation on the part of visible minorities. Consequently, there are entire communities in the city that rarely participate in swimming, largely due to accessibility and financial obstacles. However, these same communities may also face gender-training issues that make training difficult further supporting the need for gender and racial diversity in programming. And yet these communities are just as likely to be populated with passionate, capable and skilled swimmers as any other area or community. Because these communities are not proactive in water sports, they are also quickly forgotten and rarely communicated to by the competitive swim community.

The second new market, pre-LTS, is an effort to reach children before they are old enough to start an LTS program. The Sharks offer the only pre-training programming attempting to attract an increasingly younger market of swimmers. Here a summer camp rather than a full club membership approach is used, arguably a new product better suited to the

needs of a new market and thus might be more accurately classified as *Diversification*, the final strategy.

5.4.5.4 Broaden Offerings

Diversification - new product, new market

A final strategy requires innovation and an extension of current club offerings to attract new types of members. A bold and risky approach, any investment in diversification must support the extant club strategy to insure that the club's position is strengthened by the effort. Failure to do so would likely have the undesirable effect of straining already scarce resources. In most instances, the market opportunity - while lucrative or strategically important – will not align perfectly with the extant mission and, as a result, a new club or sub-brand may be required to satisfy the unfulfilled market need.

i. Master – Multi-sport – Semi-competitive Athletes

Some clubs have already begun to take steps in this direction, recognizing that it is better for the club as a whole to have new membership and new offerings. Most often these athletes do not contribute to the elite performances of the club, but they do provide another source of income, increase the volunteer base, and offer greater negotiating power for pool space. The Pirates formalized its relationship with an existing master club and now deliver its training/competitive programming. This city's master's swim clubs have lengthy wait lists, creating the opportunity for other swim clubs to extend beyond their traditional service offerings and tap into this lucrative market. What is especially nice about the master's market is that clubs interact directly with the paying customer (is less price sensitive), represents athletes with a lifelong commitment to the sport (more sustainable source of income, will swim for as long as possible as part of an active lifestyle) and is easier to plan around (set schedules).

At least three of the clubs (Pirates, Sharks, Turtles) have multi-sport athletes in training. None have specialized a specific program dedicated to these types of athletes though. Given the size and growth of sports like triathlon, it would be very easy for a swim club that already has brand recognition in the sport community, to design a program specifically for these

individuals. At this point, some clubs, at best accommodate multi-sport athletes, and at worst, allow their participation by awkwardly attempting to fit the athlete into a swim-specific program. Only in rare cases does it work well. And yet, triathletes are actively seeking the type of training programs necessary to improve each facet of their race preparation. While Triathlon clubs offer swim programming and swim clinics the reality is that the deepest swim knowledge or 'capital' is invested in the seven competitive swim clubs. To date, these clubs have not embraced or begun to adequately serve this (generally) wealthy and underserved multi-sport market.

Finally, coach Hector spoke of a desire to create a section of the club supporting semi-competitive swimming ("performance training world" or "swim-fit"). This would be a year round club offering, but unlike the typical club program would only require a three-day per week commitment. Interestingly, this program was developed and offered previously, but pool management cannibalized it by introducing its own version.

ii. Para-swimming

Additional market opportunities emerged from participant discussions focused on sub groups of swimming that can exist outside the normal delivery of club swimming. For instance, in recent years SWAD (swimmers with a disability or Para-swimmers) swimming has steadily risen in popularity with the pinnacle event the Paralympics. Para-swimmers generally enter the sport with one of two disabilities; those with congenital disabilities (including blindness, cerebral palsy, dwarfism etc.) and those with acquired or gradual onset disabilities (amputations, spinal cord injuries, head injuries etc.) (Swim Natation Canada, 2012). SNC is the governing body of both able body and para swimming, and it states that para-swimmers follow the same pathway through club programming that able-bodied swimmers follow. This overlooks two potential factors. The first is that para-swimmers are often older athletes, so a pathway engineered for youth is not an ideal fit. Secondly, as the number of para-swimmers grows, the ability to integrate seamlessly into a club increases in difficulty as these athletes have different needs. Considering this, there is the potential for a club solely focusing on these specific needs to succeed or for a club to adapt its training so that some workouts are para-

specific (one team in the study reported a sizeable para-swimmer contingent). While providing this training specificity, it is important to uphold a tenet of team sport – inclusion.

Coach Larry of the Marlins spoke strongly of his desire to offer a swim program intended for those with an intellectual disability. This is very different than SWAD swimming, in that performance is not the central focus. Currently the city has one club that focuses on this segment. I thought it was moving that a performance coach saw an opportunity to promote inclusion by introducing challenged youth to the pool. He noted though that like SWAD swimming, the biggest obstacle to such inclusive programming is pool availability.

iii. Summer Camps

The third offering is summer camps (as the Sharks offer to pre-LTS youth). The Sharks promote these camps through a number of media including Groupon, which is a creative way to reach new participants. Camps serve many purposes. First and foremost, every parent wants their child to know how to swim and camps are an ideal setting to accomplish this during the school break. Camps are an excellent means to introduce athletes to the sport, and to reach athletes who are less likely to be acquainted with competitive swimming. Summer camps not only create awareness and interest, but provide a context that might be sufficiently fun and rewarding to foster desire and action (borrowing from Lewis' [1903] AIDA model). Thus, summer camps are also a great opportunity to promote the club, its presence and position in the community, to increase revenue and to recruit new members for subsequent LTS programming and full membership.

iv. Summer Swim Club

The province, under the auspices of its Provincial Sport Organization, offers a competitive summer swim series. This is not nearly as competitive as full year swimming, but it is sometimes the channel by which athletes are identified and develop the commitment necessary to join more serious programs. Most often the summer swim clubs operate in a bit of obscurity, with little to no connection or even respect from the full year clubs. At present, athletes are unable to compete in both club types. Although there is little acknowledgement of

one another, summer clubs are a great avenue for recruiting. To do so, a competitive club must offer a summer swim club component, providing a connection between a summer program and its more focused full year offering. The Sharks are the only club to have initiated this type of programming, although the Pirates coach suggested that this is the next type of program that they would like to explore.

At some future point, all of these new offerings may become common in the market and further tactics will be needed. LTS was at first an innovative way for certain clubs to reach young athletes. It has now become so universal or commoditized that it no longer is a source of competitive advantage, and therefore clubs will be forced to find new ways to encourage participation, attract the most appropriate athletes and to elicit the highest levels of performance in the pool.

5.5 Future Research

The findings of this study improve our understanding of how families consume competitive sport participation. The findings are valuable because they are ubiquitous across many youth club settings because of the common challenges that face youth sport clubs. However, questions remain following this preliminary study. The first and potentially most important is the extent to which the findings can be replicated in other sport contexts. Ideally, this study and its findings can be duplicated in and tangibly benefit other youth club sports, but perhaps the swim context is unique and this segmentation approach is not readily transferable. The next question is what other potential consumers are under-served and what alternative club types can reach them, if any? Further, can membership-types be identified earlier and segmented more specifically? Future research should attempt to verify these findings. It would also be beneficial to pilot changes within a club to see what, if any, practical benefits follow. There is a broad need in Canada to gain clarity in program delivery so that as many clubs as possible succeed and as many athletes as possible enjoy sustained participation and successful performances.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Given that youth sport is continually evolving, sport providers should prepare for future transformations that will again alter the landscape. If a club is not forward-thinking, it may atrophy and disband as members move to programs that better serve their needs. Very clear transitions have been observed in every decade since 1970 (Coakley, 2006; Scheerder et al., 2005) and it would be naïve to assume that this decade will not see another pronounced shift. It will be led by forward-thinking clubs, while those that are static, will lose market share (or disappear as some have). Beyond the new opportunities explored, clubs have the ability, and potentially even social responsibility to design programs that prevent the attrition, burnout, and injuries discussed previously. New club orientations can counter the deficiencies in today's youth sport market. If they do not, club sport, will not remain sustainable, and the competitive and educational outlet it provides will disappear.

Sport is an activity bound by shifting social practices (Gruneau, 2006, p. 561). This statement was made in the 19th century, but the spirit of the message remains today, as we observe the changing state of youth sport, where many factors influence the play of a community's youth. Today's social values that lean toward an achievement-orientation increasingly celebrate greater performances but overlook the simultaneous repercussions of higher attrition rates, and the key to correcting this lies in a better experience for participants.

Clubs so often come to exist through the passion and effort of a retired athlete or a group of parents who are inspired to create opportunities for youth that they once enjoyed. What is a romantic beginning to a club often lacks the formal planning necessary for long term success. Although clubs are not profit-focused, they still need to operate like one in order to thrive. To thrive means to be sustainable, and to be sustainable means to creatively reach consumers with innovative and compelling service offerings. But, because clubs are so often built on passion and lack strategic considerations, they often cannot fully serve their membership. This study takes a step toward a more clearly elucidated vision of the club environ, one viewed through a marketing lens. It encourages clubs to explicitly define and communicate its philosophy and to merge it appropriately with the array of young athletic

aspirations that comprise the youth club sport market. Improving the creation, communication and delivery of the product, through quality program design, and the acquisition of appropriate coaches and training space, creates a more tailored and aligned experience for the child, parent and coach.

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Appendix A: The 10 Commandments for Swimming Parents (USA Swimming)

- I.** Thou shalt not impose thy ambitions on thy child. Remember that swimming is your child's activity. Improvements and progress occur at different rates for each individual. Don't judge your child's progress based on the performance of other athletes and don't push him based on what you think he should be doing. The nice thing about swimming is every person can strive to do his personal best and benefit from the process of competitive swimming.
- II.** Thou shalt be supportive no matter what. There is only one question to ask your child after a practice or a competition - "Did you have fun?" If meets and practices are not fun, your child should not be forced to participate.
- III.** Thou shalt not coach thy child. You are involved in one of the few youth sports programs that offer professional coaching. Do not undermine the professional coach by trying to coach your child on the side. Your job is to provide love and support. The coach is responsible for the technical part of the job. You should not offer advice on technique or race strategy. Never pay your child for a performance. This will only serve to confuse your child concerning the reasons to strive for excellence and weaken the swimmer/coach bond.
- IV.** Thou shalt only have positive things to say at a swimming meet. You should be encouraging and never criticize your child or the coach. Both of them know when mistakes have been made. Remember "yelling at" is not the same as "cheering for".
- V.** Thou shalt acknowledge thy child's fears. New experiences can be stressful situations. It is totally appropriate for your child to be scared. Don't yell or belittle, just assure your child that the coach would not have suggested the event or meet if your child was not ready. Remember your job is to love and support your child through all of the swimming experience.
- VI.** Thou shalt not criticize the officials. Please don't criticize those who are doing the best they can in purely voluntary positions.
- VII.** Honor thy child's coach. The bond between coach and swimmer is special. It contributes to your child's success as well as fun. Do not criticize the coach in the presence of your child.
- VIII.** Thou shalt be loyal and supportive of thy team It is not wise for parents to take swimmers and to jump from team to team. The water isn't necessarily bluer in another team's pool. Every

team has its own internal problems, even teams that build champions. Children who switch from team to team find that it can be a difficult emotional experience. Often swimmers who do switch teams don't do better than they did before they sought the bluer water.

IX. Thy child shalt have goals besides winning. Most successful swimmers have learned to focus on the process and not the outcome. Giving an honest effort regardless of what the outcome is, is much more important than winning. One Olympian said, "My goal was to set a world record. Well, I did that, but someone else did it too, just a little faster than I did. I achieved my goal and I lost. Does this make me a failure? No, in fact I am very proud of that swim." What a tremendous outlook to carry on through life.

X. Thou shalt not expect thy child to become an Olympian. There are 18,824 registered amateur athletes in Swim Canada. There are only 52 spots available for the Olympic Team every four years. Your child's odds of becoming an Olympian are about .0027%.

Appendix B: Club Consent Form



Name of Researcher, Faculty, Department, Telephone & Email:

Joshua Riker-Fox, Haskayne School of Business, 403 807 1737, joshua@riker-fox.com

Supervisor:

Derek Hassay, Haskayne School of Business

Title of Project:

Youth Club Sport; Product, Community, and Sustainability

Club President,

My name is Joshua Riker-Fox and I am a graduate student at the University of Calgary. I am completing a project on the dynamics of youth club sport, with a focus on swimming. The study is conducted in fulfillment of a requirement toward a Masters Degree project. The study takes a look at how clubs are structured, contrasting each team's unique product. In the process, I will interview athletes, coaches, and parents from each competitive club in Calgary. The process requires informed consent on the part of each participant and is provided to each individual prior to involvement. As an initial step, I am asking for approval on behalf the board allowing me to approach potential participants from your team. This step is performed so that all parties are aware of the intent and purpose of the study. Your signature below indicates that you acknowledge that members of your club (athletes, parents or coaches) may be asked to participate in this project. Please sign and email this document back to joshua@riker-fox.com or faxed to 403 285 9599. Thank you for your time. This study will aid the swim community as a whole and your participation is appreciated.

Name: (please print) _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Thank you for your time.

Joshua Riker-Fox Bkin Bcomm
2008 Olympic Team

If you have any further questions or want clarification regarding this research and/or your participation, please contact:

*Mr. Joshua Riker-Fox
Haskayne Business School, University of Calgary
403.807.1737 - joshua@riker-fox.com*

*Dr. Derek Hassay
Haskayne Business School, University of Calgary
403.220.8471 – derek.hassay@haskayne.ucalgary.ca*

Appendix C: Individual Athlete Consent Form



Name of Researcher, Faculty, Department, Telephone & Email:

Joshua Riker-Fox, Haskayne School of Business, 403 807 1737, joshua@riker-fox.com

Supervisor:

Derek Hassay, Haskayne School of Business

Title of Project:

Youth Club Sport; Product, Community, and Sustainability

This consent form, a copy of which has been given to you, is only part of the process of informed consent. If you want more details about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board has approved this research study.

Purpose of the Study:

The purpose of this study is to understand your experience as a swimmer competing for a team in Calgary. The study is conducted in fulfillment of a requirement toward a Master's Degree project. The goal is to develop a better understanding of youth club sport so that clubs better align with the needs of their stakeholders (swimmers, parents and coaches). As you are a competitive swimmer, I have requested you to share your story with me as I'm sure you are on a unique and exciting journey.

What Will I Be Asked To Do?

You will be asked to chat about your experience alongside a few of your team mates. The focus group should take no longer than 60 minutes to complete. Prior to participating, you must have this consent form completed by your parents. You are not required to complete the consent form until immediately preceding the focus group. Regardless of parental consent, your participation is voluntary and you may refuse to partake in the study. As well, you may withdraw from participation at any time. Your contribution to that point will remain a part of the study should you withdraw.

What Type of Personal Information Will Be Collected?

Should you agree to participate, you will be asked to provide a limited amount of personal information (your name, gender, age and club). In appreciation of your participation, you may (but are not obligated to) provide your email address, should you wish to be entered into a draw for a \$50 prepaid credit card (the winner will be notified prior to April 1). Names will remain anonymous in the project's publication, via pseudonyms. However, absolute anonymity and confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in the focus group as the researcher cannot control what is said outside of the setting. There is one item for you to consider if you decide to take part in this research. Please put a check mark on the corresponding line that grants me your permission:

I grant permission to be audio taped:

Yes: ___ No: ___

Are there Risks or Benefits if I Participate?

There are no foreseeable risks, harms, or inconveniences in your participation. The discussion will be a fun and short opportunity to reflect on your swimming experience alongside your team mates. If, in the very outside possibility, the research reveals information that is required by law to be reported to law enforcement (e.g.: child abuse), there is a legal obligation to supply that information.

What Happens to the Information I Provide?

Your contribution is completely voluntary, and confidential. You are free to discontinue participation at any time during the study. No one except the researcher and his supervisor will be allowed to see or hear any of the answers to the focus group tape. Parents are not permitted the opportunity to review or see their child's contribution. In the public composition, only pseudonyms will be used for personal names and club names, ensuring anonymity. Data related to age, gender, participation (experience, preferred events, years of membership etc.), and quotes will be included in the composition, but remain anonymous (not connected to your name). Again, absolute anonymity and confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in the focus group as the researcher cannot control what is said outside of the setting.

Personal information will be destroyed following the research and data will be stored for a maximum of three years on a computer disk, at which time, it will be permanently erased. Responses provided will be available for review during the focus group, but after this, will not be available for review. Should you choose to withdraw from the study, data provided to that point will remain in the study. The data files will be kept in a locked cabinet only accessible by the researcher and his supervisor.

Signatures (written consent)

Your signature on this form indicates that you 1) understand to your satisfaction the information provided to you about your participation in this research project, and 2) agree to participate as a research subject.

In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the investigators, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from this research project at any time. You should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

Participant's Name: (please print) _____
Participant's Signature: (if age of majority) _____ Date: _____
Participant's Email Address: (for the prepaid credit card draw) _____
Participant's Pseudonym: (to be determined prior to focus group) _____
Parent's Name: (please print) _____
Parent's Signature (if on behalf of a swimmer) _____ Date: _____
Researcher's Name: (please print) Joshua Riker-Fox
Researcher's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Questions/Concerns

If you have any further questions or want clarification regarding this research and/or your participation, please contact:

*Mr. Joshua Riker-Fox
Haskayne Business School, University of Calgary
403.807.1737 - joshua@riker-fox.com*

*Dr. Derek Hassay
Haskayne Business School, University of Calgary
403.220.8471 - derek.hassay@haskayne.ucalgary.ca*

If you have any concerns about the way you've been treated as a participant, please contact the Senior Ethics Resource Officer, Research Services Office, University of Calgary at (403) 220-3782; email rburrows@ucalgary.ca. A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference. The investigator has kept a copy of the consent form.

Appendix D: Club Information

Core Mission	Formed	Size (13-18 years)	LTS	Master	Base Team Fees
Sharks Swim Club					
Our mission is to create the opportunity for success experiences in competitive swimming, which range from Olympic dreams at one end of the spectrum to physical fitness and fun at the other.	1968	120	250	Newly started	4000\$
Pirates Swim Club					
Pirates are a competitive swim Club dedicated to the overall development of individuals to their maximum potential	1971	90	210	175	1800\$
Turtles Swim Club					
Swimming to First: Achieving excellence at all levels	1979	74	174	0	4000\$
Manta Swim Club					
To foster excellence in our competitive swimming program from a grass roots level to the international level. To instill self-confidence, a good work ethic, goal setting skills, and team building abilities in our swimmers.	1972	25	120	20	2000\$*
Crocs Swim Club					
None	1990	16	28	0	1900\$*
Club Speed					
The goal of Club Speed is to promote and support a highly competitive swim program, along with offering a pre-competitive development program. Speed is committed to providing a superior coaching staff accessible to all levels of swimming ability.	1994	70	167	0	2050\$
Marlins Swim Club					
As a community based competitive swim club for youth of all ages, the Marlins Swim Club will deliver programs that promote skills improvement and positive character development in an environment focus on fun, friendships and support.	1994	45	92	0	3000\$

* This does not include private club fees.

Appendix E: Focus Group/Interview – Club Matrix

Club \ Cohort	Athlete 13-15 (Focus Group)	Athlete 16-18 (Focus Group)	Coach (Interview)	Parent (Interview)
Sharks	X	3 Male	1 Male	1 Male
		1 Female		
Turtles	X	2 Male	X	1 Female
		0 Female		
Pirates	1 Male	X	1 Male	1 Female
	4 Female			
Marlins	X	2 Male	1 Male	1 Female
		3 Female		
Speed	3 Male	3 Male	X	X
	3 Female	0 Female		
Crocs	0 Male	X	1 Female	X
	5 Female			
Manta	2 Male	3 Male	X	X
	4 Female	0 Female		

Appendix F: Focus Group and Interview Narratives

Athlete (focus group)

Participant Identifier's _____

Date _____

I am Joshua Riker-Fox and I am an MBA student at the University of Calgary. As you know, we are conducting these focus groups because we are interested in learning more about how the youth competitive swim community operates and how the experience can be improved. Thank you for coming and agreeing to participate in my research study on organized swimming. My study will explore issues related to youth and I will be talking with athletes, parents and coaches. Our focus group will take no more than 60 minutes. I would like to remind you that this is voluntary and you may stop at any time or pass on answering any questions. I appreciate your time and permission to record this interview. I'll just be asking you questions about your experiences as a competitive swimmer and I know you'll have lots to share.

You should think of this focus group as a conversation with a purpose. I'll be asking you a number of questions about *your experience* as a swimmer competing with a Calgary club.

Everyone in the group will have an opportunity to discuss his or her experiences with the project. Some of the questions we will ask require you to comment on unique aspects of your team, your relationships with team mates and coaches, and ways you believe the experience could be improved. Your responses will remain confidential so you should feel comfortable speaking openly and honestly about your experiences.

I am audio taping this interview so that we can make a transcript of our discussion. When your remarks are included in formal reports, your particular remarks will be attributed to a pseudonym, which means no one will know that it was your thought or response.

If you haven't done so already, I need your completed consent form. As a reminder:

- Your identity will remain confidential,
- Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary; you may stop participating in the study at any time, and that
- You have a document that explains your rights as a participant today. If you have any questions, that document has the contact information you would need.

Personal introduction about who I am and my experience in sport.

First, we need to select pseudonyms or names that we will use for the discussion. So let's do this as a group.

I would like to understand your background in sport as well.

1. How many years have you swum competitively? Did any of you swim for another club previously? What brought you here? _____
2. How many hours do you devote to training per week? _____
3. Do you participate in any other school or club sports?

Thinking of your overall experience as a competitive swimmer.

4. How do your parents involve themselves in your swimming? Are they supportive?
5. What has swimming in this club done for you?
6. Do you have aspirations to reach the university level of swimming/national team/Olympic team?
7. How do you balance school, social and swim life?

Probe. Does your club enable or prevent other pursuits?

8. Do you have specific academic goals?
9. If this club was a car, what kind of car would it be?

Probe. Why is that? Qualities of the car that match your club,

10. Do you get along with your coach?
11. Who do you swim fast to please? (Coach, parent, yourself?)
12. Is it important to you that your club has a history of elite swimmers?
I only have one more question to ask.

13. What school do you go to? What neighbourhood is that in?

Parent (interview)

Participant Identifier _____ Date _____

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my research study on organized swimming. As you are aware from my initial contact with you, my study will explore issues related to youth and I will be talking with athletes, parents and coaches. This interview will take no more than 30 minutes. I would like to remind you that this is voluntary and you may stop the interview at any time or pass on answering any questions. I appreciate your time and permission to record this interview. I shall be asking you questions about your experiences as a parent of a competitive swimmer.

First I would like to understand your background.

1. How many hours per week does your child(ren) devote to swimming? _____
2. How many meets per year does your swimmer typically race in? _____
3. How many years has your family been involved with the club? Did you leave another club? If so, why? _____
4. What is your estimated average cost per child to be a member of this club? Is price an important consideration? _____
5. What is your estimated volunteer time commitment per year? _____
6. Are you a single parent?
7. What school does your child attend? What neighbourhood do you reside?
8. Did you participate in competitive sport as a child?
9. Of the parents in your household, how many participate in an organized sport?
10. How do you manage the competing demands of swimming?

Probe. Do you find your club accommodates these demands, is pressure mounting or easing?

11. Is there anything you'd like to see different about this club?
12. What are your thoughts on the other club option available in Calgary?

Probe. Coach/cost/training commitment, values, how are they better or worse than current situation?

13. Would you like to see your child train more or less?
14. Does your child have aspirations to reach the University/National Team/Olympic Team?
15. How important is past success of this club in your decision to join?

I only have one more question to ask.

16. Are you pleased with the influence your coach has had on your child? Is improvement important to you?

Coach (interview)

Participant Identifier _____ Date _____

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my research study on organized swimming. As you are aware from my initial contact with you, my study will explore issues related to youth and I will be talking with athletes, parents and coaches. This interview will take no more than 30 minutes. I would like to remind you that this is voluntary and you may stop the interview at any time or pass on answering any questions. I appreciate your time and permission to record this interview. I shall be asking you questions about your experiences as a coach of competitive swimmers.

First I would like to understand your background.

1. How many years have you coached competitive swimming? _____
2. How many years have you coached at this particular club? _____
3. How many of your current swimmers have competed at AGN's or Senior Nationals in the past? _____
4. What is the approximate size of your club, including swimmers aged 13-18?

5. What is the approximate cost for a 13-18 year old swimmer to compete for your club?

6. What is the typical weekly time commitment for such swimmers? _____
7. Which clubs, do you believe are your major competitors?
8. How does your club differ from those you consider to be your major competitors?
9. What strengths and weaknesses do you observe in other Calgary clubs?
10. What do you believe to be the strengths of your club?

Probe. Role of parents, caliber of swimmer, attitude in club, previous success of swimmers in your club

11. How do you manage your athletes' expectations?

Probe. Do you spend time talking with them? More time doing special exercises?

12. Do you have a different strategy with parents' expectations?
13. Does your club have an approach to dealing with athletes with excellent potential but inadequate finances to participate?
14. If you could extend your club's offering, what areas would you work toward?
15. What long term expectations do you have for your swimmers? University/National Team/Olympic Team?
16. Do parents volunteer sufficiently?

I only have one more question to ask.

17. If a new club formed that is unique from all current clubs, what aspects would differentiate it? i.e. potentially SWAD swimming

Thank you for your time. Is there anything you would like to add concerning your ideas about the state of competitive swimming today or your ideas about the future?

Appendix G: Product-Market Growth Matrix (Ansoff 1957)

	Existing Products	New Products
Existing Markets	Market Penetration	Product Development
New Markets	Market Development	Diversification