Report & Findings

Keeping Young Women in Sport Project

**Lacrosse SA / SA Government: Office Recreation & Sport
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Background:

In 2012 Lacrosse SA received a grant from the Office of Recreation and Sport to investigate reasons for sport drop out in young women (15- 24 yrs). This project aims to gain a better understanding of the key drivers and barriers to participation for young women in Lacrosse in South Australia. This information is important for improving the retention of players and in actioning strategies to create an improve future for women's lacrosse in the state.

Information captured from this study will be provided (subject to privacy laws) at no cost to ORS and be available for their use as agreed with Lacrosse SA.

Purpose of the study:

This study seeks to investigate the participation patterns of young women (15-24 years old) in Lacrosse in South Australia. It focuses on identifying the reasons why young women drop out from participation in the sport whilst others continue to participate.
The study also focuses on identifying strategies to promote participation for young women in lacrosse to foster their retention in the sport.

Specific Objectives of the study and research questions
The objectives of the study as outlined in the original application were streamlined to tighten the focus of the research. The key outcomes and questions are:

1. To increase understanding of why and how young women choose to be involved or not involved in lacrosse particularly and sport in general.

   What are the factors influencing participation for young women (15-24 yrs) in lacrosse?

   - *What are the key factors influencing 'drop out' from participation in women's sport in general and specifically from women's lacrosse in South Australia?*

   - *What are the key driving factors influencing 'active' participation of young women in sport and specifically in women's lacrosse in South Australia?*

2. To identify strategies to influence future actions by LXSA to foster retention and sustained participation for young women in Lacrosse.

   - *What are the range of possible strategies for influencing retention rates and participation for young women in Lacrosse?*

   - *How can these strategies be actioned by LXSA in order to shape the immediate and long term future for women's lacrosse?*

Research Approach

A participatory evaluation research approach was used to gain qualitative data from the lived experiences of young women (15-24 yrs) in lacrosse utilizing mixed methods including survey, case study interview and discussion.

The report findings are based upon an analysis of the following:
- 40 young women who 'dropped out' of the sport and are no longer playing
- 20 young women who are currently actively participating in the 2013 lacrosse season
- A review of contemporary literature of young women's participation in sports

The recommendations will include application of the findings into proposed action strategies to assist retention and sustained participation for young women in Lacrosse in the South Australian context.

Review of literature

There is a dearth of research information relating to why young women (15-24 years old) drop out of lacrosse however there is considerable information available from studies investigating young women's drop out from sport in general.

Reasons for drop off rate

A study jointly commissioned by the Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation and Sport England in 2012 suggests withdrawal from competitive sport is best understood as a complex and multi-factored process. This research acknowledges the importance of understanding the context of the teenage years and recognising the pressures and demands for young women at this time, in order to then appreciate the role of sport in their lives. It is significant to note that most sports reported a significant drop out of female participants during their teenage years.

The teenage years can be challenging for young women as they experience many personal and lifestyle changes and are confronted with competing pressures and choices.   During these years the personal and social environment becomes increasingly important. Peer pressure has a significant influence, together with increased body awareness and changing relationship patterns. There is increased pressure to do well at school in the upper secondary years and greater independence and autonomy post schooling years. Young women's lives become more complex as interests shift and expand to include work, school/university, fashion & trends and relationships. With so many choices and limited time sport has a lot to compete with which often results in modified participation patterns such reducing the number of sports played, reducing the commitment level or dropping out from the sport (WSFF 2012; DSR 2013; Gould 2007; Department of Sport and Recreation 2013)

The chart below categorises the vast array of reasons identified for young women dropping out of sport (WSFF 2012).

Category	Key reasons
1. Personal Psychosocial issues	Self-perceptions: Body image, embarrassment, unfit, not good at sport, lazy. Gender – the impact of stereotypes (masculine / feminine)
2. Lifestyle & transitions	Relationships Money Parent support Work – Job Friends Study Other Sports / Hobbies
3. Sporting reasons	Tired of playing against the same teams Time for something new Risk of getting hurt Lack of Coaches Limited links from School to Clubs Transport Proximity of playing venue Jump to senior league Too competitive Lack of Players Fall out with other players No future potential career opportunities Unfriendly team/club or competition Seasonal No role models Lack of Publicity Lack of match play or opportunity to play Coaches personality

The most common reasons for drop out across the eight participating sports in the WSFF (2012) research were listed as:

1. **Competing 'social' pressures.** With increasing independence young women experience an expanding array of social interests to occupy their time. They also experience increased pressure to do well at school and so an increased time is committed to their studies reducing the time for hobbies & sports.

2. **Conflict with other commitments and pressures.** Young women are increasingly time pressured particularly when other commitments (such as work or another sport) require regular fixed hours. This can lead to clashes in schedules with conflicting demands causing young women to have to juggle the demands and make

choices about their participation.   Instead of playing several different sports some are dropped in order to meet the commitments of a single sport.

3. **Time for something new.**   Playing a sport for a long time can becoming boring for some players particularly if they started when they were very young. They may look to try a different sport or pick up a non-sporting interest.   Playing sport can also demand a large commitment from players particularly if they have to dedicate a lot of time and effort to play at higher levels. This can lead to players leaving the sport as they are resentful of the time it takes and they wish to have greater freedom.

4. **Poor Coaching / teaching.**   The role of the coach is highly significant in influencing the quality of sports experience. Coaches who lack enthusiasm & interest for their role are less likely to influence players to remain playing. Overly aggressive or highly critical coaching is off putting for players, as is playing 'favourites' and limiting opportunities for all participants to play in games.   Enjoyment is positively influenced by a coach whose actions are enthusiastic, supportive, fair and encouraging of all players.

5. **Big jump from Junior to Senior competition.**   The transition from junior to senior levels can be intimidating for some young women as they perceive differences in playing ability, interests and attitudes to playing.

6. Not enough opportunity to play in matches and a lack in number of players were also indicated as limiting factors.

The 2008 Sport England study on sports participation for women and girls supported WSFF 2012 Report findings indicating the *lack of time* as being a significant limitation on participation. Other practical barriers included a *lack of childcare services* surrounding women's sport and a *lack of money*.   Financial constraints including costs for uniform, fees, equipment and travel have been identified in several studies as a key contributing factor to drop out (Sport England 2008; Park & Wright 2000; Department of Sport and Recreation 2013; Women's Sports Foundation 2012).

Personal barriers including *body image* is identified as significant factor influencing female participation in a number of studies (Sport England 2008; Park & Wright 2000; Garrett 2009; Women's Sports Foundation 2012; Lench 2006).   Self-perceptions are paramount for young women and for many this means they feel on show or in the spot light whilst participating in

sport. For some women this idea of their bodies being on display can be confronting. The media typically intensifies this perception as they publicise 'ideal' body shapes and sizes which in Western culture is represented by slim, youthful and sensual frames as the ideal image. Young women who are not conforming to this stereotype are frequently judged negatively and withdraw from sport in order to avoid feeling inadequate. *Clothing /uniform expectation* in some sports may compound the problem for participants experiencing body image issues and serve as a turn off for girls or women with conflicting cultural or social values.

A significant social and cultural barrier relates to *gender and the male dominated culture of sport.* The sport culture particularly in those activities requiring strength, speed and domination is viewed as a masculine space which can immediately limit the participation of girls and women.   Some women are turned off sport because they see it as male dominated whilst others perceive being sporty as conflicting with their femininity (Sport England 2008; Park & Wright 2000; Garrett 2009; Lench 2006). Other social and cultural barriers associated with attitudes and prejudices about sexuality, disability or ethnicity can also limit participation and impact on drop-out rates.

A key personal barrier associated with young women dropping out of sport is a *lack of self-confidence* and perceived personal competence. This is a complex factor linked to a number of variables including the competition structure, the playing environment, the opportunities to play, the emphasis on winning together with the influence of parents, significant others including coaches.   The competitive aspect of sport provides an appeal and challenge to many participants however some girls and women are turned off by a highly competitive environment particularly if winning is over emphasized.   The sole focus on winning at all costs undermines the challenge associated with individual/ team effort, improvement and achievement. Young people who are frequently pushed to win at all costs may feel discouraged and lose interest in the sport whilst individuals who engage in sport for pleasure, take pride in accomplishment and feel competent are likely to maintain an interest in sport (Ryan, Williams, Patrick & Deci 2009; Department of Sport and Recreation 2013; Gould 2007; Lench 2006; Women's Sports Foundation 2012; Sport England 2008)
It is important that sports provide opportunity for young girls and women to play at an appropriate level against teams of a similar standard. This includes providing alternative

competition opportunities where emphasis is focused on other outcomes such as fun, social engagement and improvement (Sport England 2008).

Parents and significant others can exert either a positive or negative social influence on young women's interest and continued participation in sport. Positive interactions such as showing an interest, acknowledging effort, improvement, team work and encouragement aid in the development of positive self-esteem by providing an environment supporting self-determined engagement in sport (Ryan, Williams, Patrick & Deci 2009). The role of the coach is critical in sustaining participation in the sport and *poor coaching* has been identified previously as a significant drop out factor. Some participants reported feeling inadequate due to lacking the skills and capabilities to play or disadvantaged through lack of opportunity to play due to ability levels (Department of Sport and Recreation 2013; Gould 2007; Lench 2006; Women's Sports Foundation 2012). Coaches can significantly influence the level of competence and confidence of their players by providing engaging practices, meaningful feedback, by interacting positively and by providing a supportive inclusive environment. In more recent times, sexual harassment and abuse have been reported as a barrier to ongoing participation in sport (Sport England 2008).

A recent study commissioned by Lacrosse Victoria (2013) investigating strategies for increasing the participation of girls and women in Lacrosse identified several key limiting factors influencing participation. The 'proximity' of playing fields and the associated travel distances was a limitation as well as the lack of flexibility in playing days and times. The 'time demands' associated with the sport also presented a challenge due to the additional roles associated with Lacrosse as a smaller sport where participants are often responsible for coaching, running clubs, umpiring and other responsibilities. A lack of systematic recruitment in the sport and competition from other more high profile sports also were identified as limitations.

Key Reasons for Continued Participation

The Women's Sports Foundation (2012) research on young women who have chosen to remain in sport indicates psycho-social factors are a powerful influence for continued participation. The team environment is seen as a support structure providing a 'sense of belonging', a place where friendships and personal identity can be developed. For some

women sport participation also provides the opportunity to gain personal fitness, to learn new skills and to extend oneself (Women's Sports Foundation 2012).

Other studies support these findings indicating being part of a team, experiencing positive social support, being challenged to improve skills, having fun, maintaining health and fitness as key reasons for continued participation (Australian Sports Commission 2013; Active For Life 2012; Davis 2010; Robbins 2013; Allender, Cowburn & Foster 2006; Garrett 2009; Women's Sports Foundation 2012).

Young women report a sense of achievement when they engage in physical activity and are challenged (Garrett 2009). The sense of personal achievement associated with team participation builds self-confidence and empowerment by fulfilling needs for autonomy, competence and connection serving as a prime motivator for continued participation (Ryan, Williams, Patrick & Deci 2009).

Strategies to Increase Participation Rates

The literature outlines a variety of initiatives aimed at increasing opportunities for encouraging participation and promoting retention rates of young women in sport. These strategies can be grouped in categories focusing on the competition structures, club practices, active role models, community networks, social and cultural barriers (Shaler 2013; National Womensport & Recreation Survey 2007; Australian Womensport and Recreation Association 2013; Sport England 2008; Women's Sports Foundation 2012).

A summary of these strategies is outlined below:

Competition structure

- Look at the design structure of the competition and make sure women and girls have the opportunity to play at the appropriate levels against teams of similar standards.
- Provide opportunities for a diversity of levels (ie beginning, intermediate, advanced, social, family etc) and show flexibility in the structure of these levels. This could include differences in weeks for the competition, the numbers and field size.
- Ensure there is a clarity in understanding the focus of various levels of competition
- Encourage mentoring and support in all aspects of the competition structure.
- Consider the day/time when competitions are available in order to promote opportunity to play - weekends or weekdays.   Consideration of the changing demands across the teenage years.
- Allow flexibility in clothing / uniforms

- Ensure safe playing facilities, education and enacted policies for child protection.
- Challenge dominant stereotypes and adopt inclusive positive role models in publicity
- Ensure participation opportunities are available in various age groupings and consider strategies for transition into senior levels
- Accept diversity in uniforms to minimise impact of body image and promote cultural / social inclusion.
- Provide quality coach education and umpire education.
- Use social media to promote participation
- Consider ways to connect the opportunities to play at school into community club participation.

Club structure

- Encourage mentoring at the club to build connections and a supportive network.
- Encourage women's participation in leadership roles and sharing of responsibilities
- Consider a flexible fee paying structure and opportunity to access uniforms and equipment.
- Be flexible with uniform selection for various groups
- Encourage new players of all ages to participate and celebrate personal and team improvement and enjoyment of the game.
- Provide pathways catering for different competition interests.
- Maintain links with previous players and encourage them to come back to the sport.
- Encourage family participation in club activities.
- Educate parents and club members about the importance of encouragement and support for all levels of participation.

Coaching

- Considerate of the changing demands of young women and remain flexible to encourage continued participation.
- Provide a positive climate at practice and games. Support, encourage and develop individual and team capabilities.
- Focus on personal and team improvement and enjoyment in playing.
- Be aware of all players and consider ways to provide them all with opportunities to play.

Study One –

Forty (40) young women (in the 15-24 yr old range) who had previously played lacrosse and had 'dropped out of the sport' participated in this study. These former players were selected from the LXSA register of players and they were contacted by phone by the research assistant using a consistent scripted communication. The phone survey questions focused on the participants' experiences in lacrosse and they included open ended questions about what they had enjoyed about playing and semi structured questions to identify the barriers associated with their drop out from the sport.   A final question was also directed to gain their perspective on strategies for improving the sport experience.

Study Two –

The second study was undertaken using an individual face to face structured interview with 20 players who participated in the U 15- U 18 competition in 2013.   The question focused on the reasons why they played lacrosse.

Results Study One

How did they come to be involved with lacrosse?

School experience = 11

Proximity to a club = 4

Wanted to try something new = 1

Fitness and socialise =1

Family and/ or Friends = 21

Analysis & Implications: This data clearly indicates the significance of family and friends connections and the school experience as the key entrance path into playing the sport. This information is important as it enables LXSA to critically reflect on its strategies for marketing, recruitment and development strategies.

Recommended points of consideration for LXSA are:
- Grow the opportunities for school teams to participate in carnivals and events to expose them to the sport.

- Provide opportunities for play at the local club and initiate marketing in the surrounding community.
- Consider a variety of marketing strategies of the sport to capture a more diverse audience and exposure of the game. Examples from cricket, tennis might assist.
- Target possible players who might be looking for a change in sport and promote the unique features of lacrosse as a point of interest.
- Use the friendship network to encourage new participants to come and play. It is important to provide a chance for new players to have an appropriate level of competition to play in.
- Lacrosse in SA has traditionally drawn on generations of families to sustain its numbers. Work on increasing the diversity of families into the sport & consider provide opportunity for family participation.

The age of drop out from the sport.

Data indicates the following spread of ages of drop out starting at age of 14 years and extending to 23 years. The number of drop outs at the age is indicated in the bracket below.
14 (2), 15(1), 16(7), 17(4), 18(11), 19(7), 20(4), 21(2), 23(2)

Analysis & Implications: The data features the 17-19 age group as the prime time for drop out from the sport (over 50%). This is consistent with the earlier research findings indicting the significant changes in the lifestyle patterns of young women across the teenage years resulting in increased demands on their time and decisions on how they prioritise and juggle these demands.
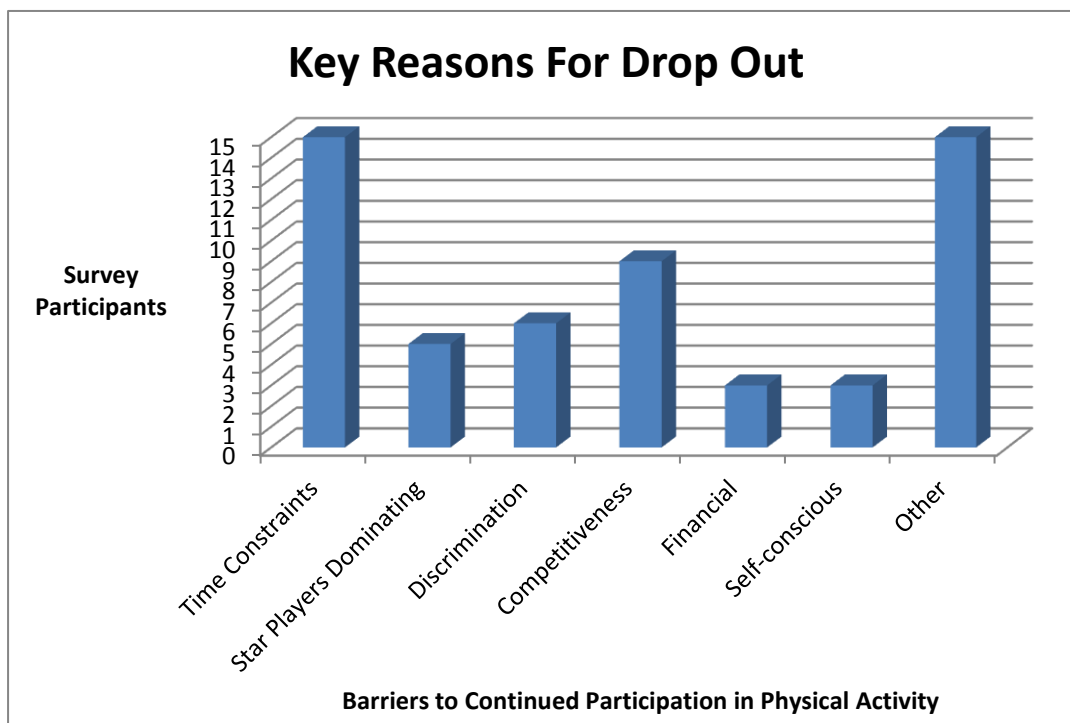
Recommended points of consideration for LXSA are:
- Undertake further research with the U 17-19 age group to identify the favoured options for playing days times and the type of competition structure.
- Seek out players from other sports who might be looking for a change to come and try lacrosse.
- Provide coach education to ensure there is an awareness of the situation of players in these years and increase flexibility in the demands in order to maintain their participation.

What were the barriers to continued participation?

Analysis & Implications: The data indicates an array of reasons for dropping out of Lacrosse which are consistent with the background literature review. The results reflect the complexity of the issue and they highlight the significance of personal and lifestyle changes during the teenage years and how these increased demands create competing time pressures and decisions choices about participation (or not) in lacrosse.

The graph indicates the reported reasons for drop out from the sport.

Survey results showed that the primary reason for drop out were *time constraints* (25%). The demands of work and study were recorded as the highest contributor to drop out. This is particularly evident from the ages of 18-23 years. In addition to this participants felt that they could not maintain these demands as well as keep up with their social life. For these participants other activities (work, study & social life) were considered more important when making decisions about how to use their time than playing lacrosse.

The category of 'other' was recorded equal with time constraints as the main contributing factor to drop out. This category represented a variety of factors which were expressed by individual participants in the study and recorded by the assistant. There were a variety of reasons in this category including *injury* (2), *choosing to play another sport* rather than

lacrosse (6). The sport chosen over lacrosse was Netball (5) and there was a direct clash in times for participation in both sports. One player considered Netball a larger sport with more chance to meet friends. Two players indicated they had *moved suburb or into the country* and there was no lacrosse available or it was too far to travel to their original club. *Poor coaching* or issues with coaching were included in the 'other' category as well as in the discrimination category. Specific examples of favouring players and providing opportunities for those who were more skilled were listed. One player indicated they were unaware of the pathways offered in lacrosse after school participation.

Competitiveness was recorded as the second highest reason for withdrawal from the sport. 17% of participants indicated they preferred to play at a recreational level over a highly competitive level and withdrew from lacrosse for this reason. There were a range of comments relating to this including suggestions of providing play opportunities during the week in the evenings as well as catering for different interest levels of participation. *Self-consciousness* was identified as a reason for withdrawal from the sport by two participants and this related to issues of self-image being on show and gendered practice. In the second case specific mention was made of the issue of uniform where they felt uncomfortable in a skirt and singlet top and would have preferred the option of shorts and a t-shirt type top.

Many of these issues are representative of the barriers to participation discovered in the literature review and therefore many of the strategies for implementing change are applicable to the context of lacrosse in South Australia. Specific points of consideration related to the findings of this study are outlined in the dot points below.

Recommended points of consideration for LXSA are:

LXSA Board/ clubs and the Competition structure

- Be aware of the increasing and competing demands faced by young women across the teenage years and consider ways to structure competition opportunities more flexibly. Coaches need to be aware of this and adapt where possible to cater for these demands.
- Review season by season the possible competition structure to provide opportunity to play at the appropriate levels against teams of similar standards. Consider ways to include a recreational option of participation with differences in the structure ie. weeks for the competition, the numbers and field size. Market this accordingly.
- Consider the day/time when competitions are available in order to promote opportunity to play - weekends or weekdays.

- Look to schedule times for play different from other sports such as Netball. This might allow players from Netball to play Lacrosse.
- Accept diversity in uniforms to minimise impact of body image and promote cultural / social inclusion. Provide information to clubs about this
- Build a quality *coach education* program and raise issues of concern.
- Use social media to increase awareness about some of these issues and a clear position statement about inclusive practice.
- Make explicit the connections from participation at school to the local community clubs.
- Consider providing opportunities to play in country and regional regions
- Clubs be flexible with uniform selection for various groups and consider options such as a skirt or shorts.

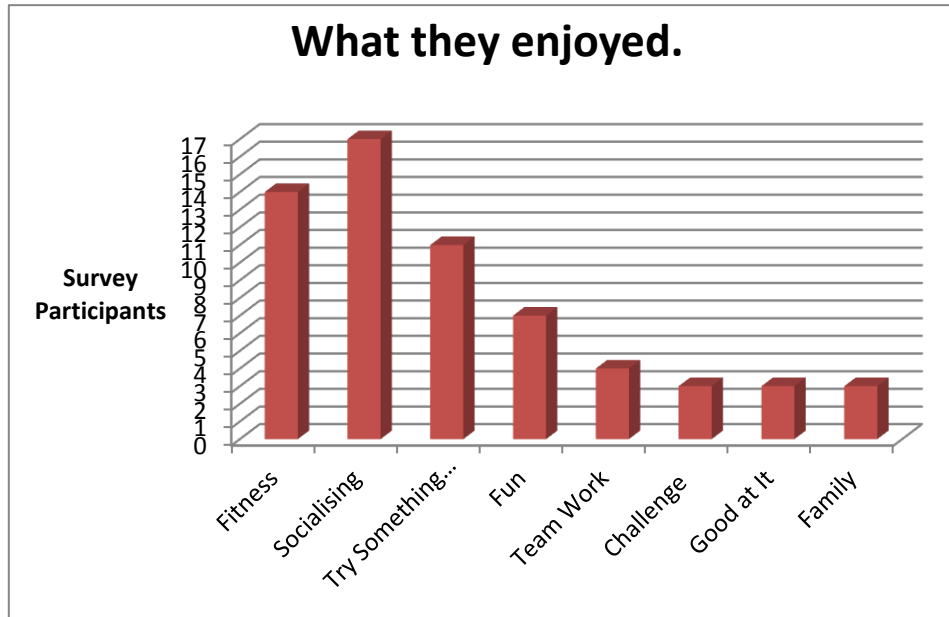**What aspects of lacrosse did you enjoy?**

Analysis of the data from group 1 participants.

The 'drop out' participants were asked to indicate the aspects of lacrosse they enjoyed when they were playing the sport. This data was drawn from past reflection and the memories of when they previously played lacrosse.

The *social benefits* were consistently reported as a key reason for playing. Date suggested that participating in a team environment enjoyment, provided an opportunity to meet new people and to be with friends.
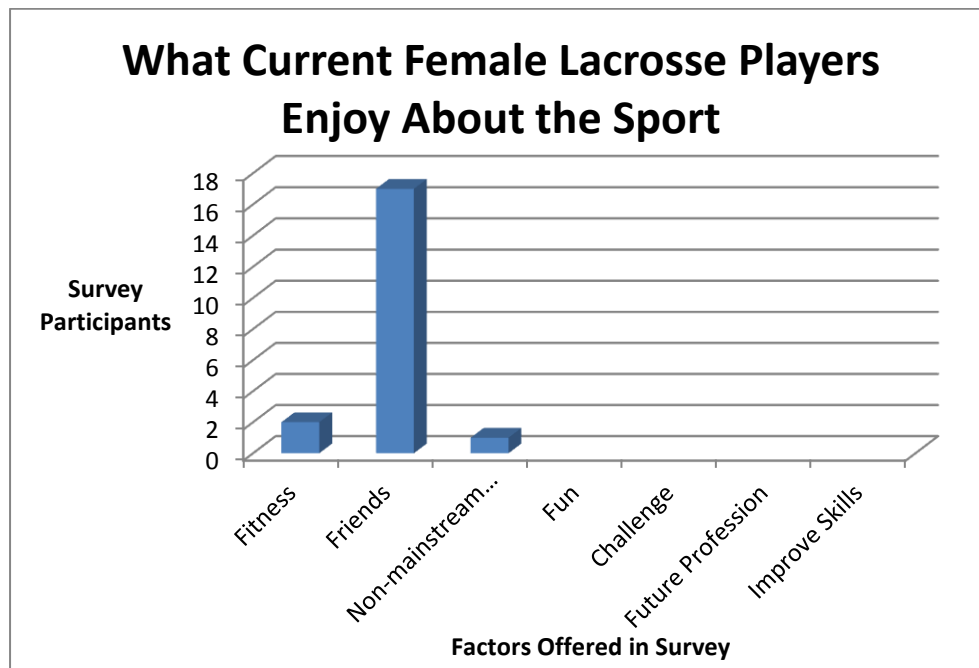
The responses of 'trying something new', 'teamwork', 'challenge', 'being good at it' can all be accumulated into a distinct feature associated with the '*nature of the game*' of lacrosse. Data indicates that participants enjoyed the game, particularly its unique features and the fact that it was different from other sports.   Another reported benefit was the enjoyment of *being active and the fitness benefits* associated with the running nature of the game.   This confirms the game itself is a prime source of motivation and enjoyment.   This factor is particularly significant when considering marketing and promotion of the game.

The graph below illustrates what these players enjoyed about lacrosse when they were playing.

What they enjoyed.

Survey Participants

17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0

Fitness · Socialising · Try Something... · Fun · Team Work · Challenge · Good at It · Family

Study 2 **Data on what young women currently participating in lacrosse enjoy about the game**

The face to face interview with 20 current players in the U15-U18 age group is similar to the data gathered from the current non participants as they reflected on what they enjoyed about playing lacrosse. The social aspects 'being with friends' was the most significant reason followed by aspects of the nature of the game such as the uniqueness of the sport and the fitness benefits.

What Current Female Lacrosse Players Enjoy About the Sport

Survey Participants

18 16 14 12 10 8 6 4 2 0

Fitness · Friends · Non-mainstream... · Fun · Challenge · Future Profession · Improve Skills

Factors Offered in Survey

Ideas or strategies to assist in improving the sport

Analysis & Implications:

Data from this question was analysed and clustered into key categories including better coaching (12), improved umpiring(3), increased promotion and marketing of the sport(5), a variety of team tournaments (1) and options for uniforms(1). The coaching comments included providing a fairer time for all players to participate, less pressure when training, increased opportunity to play.

Specific implications for LXSA in relation to these comments have been addressed in the earlier section of the study.

Conclusion

This research has provided rich information on the complexity of the issue of drop of rate of young women from participation in sport. The data gathered from 40 young women who have dropped out of Lacrosse has added to our understanding of this issue in South Australia. The analysis of the data has provided important information to address the questions raised at the start of this study.

- *What are the key factors influencing 'drop out' from participation in women's sport in general and specifically from women's lacrosse in South Australia?*

- *What are the key driving factors influencing 'active' participation of young women in sport and specifically in women's lacrosse in South Australia?*

A series of guiding suggestions are embedded throughout the report which can be considered when LXSA plans the future strategies to promote the sport and to improve the retention of young women in the game. These will assist in addressing the questions raised at the start of the study.

- *What are the range of possible strategies for influencing retention rates and participation for young women in Lacrosse?*

- *How can these strategies be actioned by LXSA in order to shape the immediate and long term future for women's lacrosse?*

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