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A just organized youth sport

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ABSTRACT

Organized youth sport has become a prominent activity in Western societies, one around which myriad families structure their daily lives. Despite its popularity, or rather because of it, youth sport is besotted with complex problems. One distinctive set of problems pertains to children's opportunities to benefit from engagement in sport. Such problems require a reflection on the conditions of justice. The goal of this paper is to explore ethical guidelines to make youth sport more just. The paper begins by characterizing childhood, youth, and youth sport. Then, it articulates considerations of justice in youth sport. Together, these sections provide a basis to formulate the general features of a just youth sport. What emerges is a vision of youth sport that the adults involved in it should emphasize and implement if their young charges, and youth sport, are to flourish, as well as a novel approach to formulating and justifying normative criteria to make youth sport more just.

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Since the 1970s, organized youth sport has become, in the United States and in other Western countries too, a prominent social activity, one around which myriad families structure their daily lives.¹ According to the 2018 National Physical Activity Plan Alliance (2018), that year more than 50% of 6- to 12-year-old children and high school students reported participating in a team sport during the previous year (21–23). Illustrating this trend, journalist Miriam Kreinin Souccar (2015) reported that 'nearly 40 million kids play organized team sports in the US'. It is estimated that the parents of those children and youth spend around \$10 billion a year on travel for athletic commitments and \$6 billion a year on private coaching (Souccar 2015). Making provisions for and equipping young athletes involve another staggering amount of money. The extent of participation in youth sport and the earnestness that surrounds it, as well as its economy and concomitant effects, have led journalists and

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scholars to declare that people are obsessed with youth sport (Hyman 2009; Souccar 2015). Rather than extolling its merits, this characterization of youth sport points to the problems besetting it.

One of many distinctive sets of problems pertains to children's opportunities to benefit from engagement in sport. For instance, young athletes, and their parents, often complain about unfair treatment when coaches give them few opportunities to partake in competition, precluding them from the benefits it offers. This and other problems pertaining to children's opportunities to benefit from engagement in sport require a reflection on the conditions of justice. The goal of this paper is to explore ethical guidelines to make youth sport more just. That is, our concern here is with the requirements regarding the treatment of young athletes to facilitate the development of just social arrangements in youth sport. The paper begins with a characterization of childhood, youth, and youth sport. The section following the establishment of this framework articulates considerations of justice in youth sport. Both sections provide a basis to articulate the general features of just youth sport activities. To do so, the last section considers not only the particularity of childhood and youth but also the benefits to be dispensed in the different types of youth sport, with their unique demands and purposes. What emerges is a vision of youth sport that the adults (coaches, administrators, managers, officials, and physical education teachers) involved in it should emphasize and implement if their young charges, and youth sport, are to flourish, as well as a novel approach to formulating and justifying normative criteria to make youth sport more just.

Childhood, youth, and youth sport

In 1989, the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*² defined a 'child' as 'every human being below the age of eighteen years unless, under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier' (United Nations 1989). While in many countries the legal threshold for childhood is 18 years of age, the caveat of the United Nations' definition suggests that complex legal, cultural, social, religious, economic, and political considerations influence the extent of childhood. Thus, childhood is recognized as a distinctive stage of life whose limits, especially in the upper end, are somewhat imprecise. Important as it is, this international agreement does not fully elaborate on what characterizes this stage of life. However, it clarifies that 'the child, by reason of his [or her] physical and mental immaturity, needs special safeguards and care, including appropriate legal protection' and that 'for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality, [the child] should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding' (United Nations 1989). In short, this international agreement identifies childhood as a stage of life extending from life's early phases into adulthood, differentiates

it from adulthood, states that children should be treated in accordance with their distinctiveness, and acknowledges it as a period involving various kinds of growth.

The work of Tamar Schapiro (1999) is useful in fleshing out the nature of childhood and the (developmental) interests and needs of children. Following Kantian ethics, which stresses the importance of both rational will and personal autonomy, Schapiro maintains that 'the condition of childhood is one in which the agent is not yet in a position to speak in her own voice because there is no voice which counts as hers' (729). For Schapiro (2003), children are underdeveloped agents – they lack enough rational will to have it count as 'constitutive of their own authority' (594) – and, consequently, need support to come up with the necessary reasons to govern themselves. Unsurprisingly, in this view, childhood becomes a normative predicament in which 'the undeveloped agent, unlike the developed agent, is unable to work out a plan of life "all at once"' (1999, 730).

The daunting task children confront is to establish enough rational will – an own voice – to constitute the authority necessary to govern themselves. In other words, they have to 'carve out a space between themselves and the forces within them. They are to do this by trying on principles in the hope of developing a perspective they can endorse as their own' (Schapiro 1999, 735). Such perspective assists children in outlining the contours of a comprehensive life plan and, at the same time, in governing it autonomously. Although Schapiro (1999) contends that children have a primary responsibility in becoming developed agents, adults have negative as well as positive obligations, whose main purpose is to 'make children's dependence our enemy' (737), to facilitate this process. Adults should meet these obligations 'by safeguarding children's interests, including their distinctively human interest in achieving autonomy' (Schapiro 2003, 594).

Childhood, and children's quest to become developed agents, is a lengthy and flexible stage. Those close to its end are typically known as 'youth'. Even though youth are closer to adulthood than younger children, they are still children and continue to exhibit some of the characteristics of this stage of life. Whether younger children or youth, the life and accomplishments of children are not only intelligible or valuable instrumentally in relation to the achievement of autonomy in adulthood. Their multiple talents, merits, and deeds in endeavors such as sport, art, and science, to mention just a few, possess intrinsic worth. Indeed, childhood is better approached as both a preparation for adulthood and a stage of life having intrinsic worth. To wit, critical examinations of children's activities should consider the development of children's rational will, autonomy, and capabilities, as well as recognize children's preferences and choices. As many specialists contend, children should not be treated merely as adults in the making (see Messner and Musto 2014; Gheaus 2015). Rather, their distinctive and evolving voices offer unique

perspectives to be heard and respected. Balancing these instrumental and intrinsic demands could be challenging at times. Thus, as Harry Brighouse (2003) advances, adults must deliberate further after discerning children's preferences and capabilities to serve their interests and provide the support they need. That is especially so in the case of interests and needs children might not identify right away, such as their interest in achieving autonomy or the need to be included in social activities vital to the development of their autonomy.

Adults enroll children in youth sport well before children have fully identified their interests and needs. Youth sport usually refers to sport coached, administered, managed, supervised, and officiated by adults for and practiced by children of all ages, from the very young to youth closer to adulthood. Given the structure of the schooling system, in the United States, but also in other countries, around the onset of puberty, when children begin to be considered youth, 'is typically when competitive athletics are integrated into schools' and 'the athletic organization of late middle school and high school adds greater structural influence on sports that do not apply to the very young' (Erdal 2018, 2).³ In this respect, Daryl Siedentop (2002) advances that junior sport has three main goals: the educative goal, the public health goal, and the elite-development goal. The first two are strongly related to developmental interests and needs of participants, while the third refers to the pursuit of athletic excellence. Siedentop conceptualizes junior sport as 'an infrastructure of opportunity' and insists that the first two goals 'are more fundamental to the system as a whole' (398 and 396).

Whereas analyses of childhood rightly conceive of children as vulnerable agents in need of protection and care, adults, including those involved in youth sport, should not ignore, as indicated above, children's unique and emerging voices and perspectives. One reason is that adults' tendency to exaggerate children's need for protection and care could significantly limit their potential to contribute to social life, hindering their capacities for self-development and self-determination. As childhood experts emphasize, youth are capable, responsible, and legitimate social actors (Kemp 2014). Indeed, John Wall (2010) regards them as a 'distinctive [albeit far from homogeneous] social group' (14), or category, one constructed around specific worlds of meaning and ways to relate to the world around them. For him, the cornerstone of children's identity is their ability to rely on creativity to make sense of everyday occurrences and confront them, with play being children's creative activity par excellence. In this regard, Wall (2010) contends that children are defined by their playful agency or 'their capability for transforming the world into ever new possibilities' (63). Respecting their agency is key to developing 'child-centered' youth sport activities and competitions (David 2005).

However, whether affiliated with the schooling system or not, youth sport tends to increasingly underline, particularly after the onset of puberty, what

Jay Coakley (2017) calls the ‘performance ethic’, which equates a positive sport experience with skill development and competitive success (86). Youth sport, Coakley critically expounds, widely emphasizes this ethic ‘to the point that *fun* now means improving skills, becoming more competitive, winning, and being promoted into elite performance categories’ (86). Coakley rightly points out and warns about the excesses in youth sport, but, as Cesar R. Torres (2015b), along with several other scholars, argues, ‘skill development and competition are neither unavoidably damaging nor inevitably opposed to its goal of fostering the overall welfare of participants’ (64).⁴ Nonetheless, it is clear that youth sport, in contrast to informal sport experiences arranged and controlled by children and physical education classes, encompasses structured athletic activities in which competition features prominently (Holt et al. 2019).

Considerations of justice and youth sport

Philosophical analyses of sport regard justice as one of its fundamental elements, one without which sport activities would be less valuable or even meaningless. Francis W. Keenan (1975), for instance, borrows John Rawls’ (1971) famous adage ‘Justice is the first virtue of social institutions’ to highlight the centrality of justice in sport institutions. Also inspired by Rawls, Sigmund Loland (1999) takes the role of justice in sport to be the distribution of benefits and burdens ‘according to performance of athletic skills as defined in the relevant rules of the game’ (166). In his view, justice frameworks in sport are particular to the activity. Although different participants may enter sport intending different goals (e.g., prizes, fame, recognition, tension, challenge, or mastery) (Loland 2002), they share the common structural goal pertaining to the logic of sport: ‘to measure, compare, and rank two or more participants according to athletic performance’ (Loland 2002, 44). Justice frameworks center on devising equal opportunity rules to ensure that game advantage results preferentially from the participants’ merits (e.g., their efforts to develop, exercise, and attain athletic excellence), and, thereby, each party’s performance is recognized based on merit.

In alignment with Loland’s account, philosophical examinations of justice in sport primarily center on the conditions that competitions must meet to secure meaningful performance evaluations (Schweiger 2014). To put it differently, sport philosophers concerned with justice in sport have mainly sought to devise competitive procedures to assess performance as fairly as possible. Performance-centered examinations, thus, restrict justice issues in sport to in-competition situations in which a sport institution allocates benefits and burdens among participants based on their performance. In doing so, they regard justice-related problems beyond the playing field as secondary or irrelevant to philosophical discussions around justice in sport. For

instance, Martínková, Parry, and Imbrišević (2021) differentiate 'competition-fairness' from 'context-fairness'. Although these authors accept that both affect the outcome of sport events, their analysis of justice is restricted to the former because 'it is not clear what sport is supposed to do about such context-unfairnesses' (9). They also claim that 'sport's aim is at least to provide fairness in the actual competition, wherever the athletes come from and whatever their sporting (and social) genealogy' (9). Similarly, in their report on the inclusion of transgender athletes in sport, Pike, Hilton, and Howe (2021) regard a crucial social, contextual feature such as gender identity as 'only marginally relevant for sport' and restrict their examination of justice to '*in-game fairness*, which is our primary concern, and *should be* that of sport regulators' (21–22, our emphases).

Although securing a level playing field to provide athletes with equal opportunities to perform is necessary for justice, it is insufficient to promote just sport (English 1978; Sailors 2014). Problems concerning in-competition equality of opportunity hardly exhaust the variety of issues related to justice in sport. Game advantage is not the only benefit sport institutions allocate (see López Frías, Díaz, and Park 2021). By engaging in competition, athletes achieve out-of-competition benefits such as fame, fortune, prizes, and publicity. These benefits may not, strictly speaking, belong to the competitive logic of sport (Parker 2012). However, since the distribution of this type of benefit strongly depends on in-competition results (e.g., athletes who win the most prestigious sport competitions tend to accumulate a higher amount of benefits such as social recognition and fortune), the distribution of these benefits should be, and actually is, a justice concern for sport institutions. Consider the 'equal pay for equal play' debate in women's soccer. Providing women with a remuneration that does justice to their in-competition performance is a justice concern for soccer institutions. These broader justice issues require expanding the scope of justice analyses in sport beyond the competitive fields.

Competitive results not only have a direct impact on the allocation of out-of-competition benefits, but they also have deeper social ramifications, including effects on fundamental social processes, groups, and benefits beyond the competitive fields (LaVaquer-Manty 2009). Accounts of justice in sport that overlook the social ramifications of competitive allocation processes remove sport from the larger social networks of which they are part. The incorporation of larger social benefits into analyses of justice in sport demands the use of a greater variety of justice principles, not only those concerning equality of opportunity. As Lesley A. Jacobs (2004) explains, 'some goods and resources ...should not be allocated through procedures that conform to the model of equality of opportunity [i.e.,] competitive mechanisms for distribution' (13). According to Jacobs, health, social status, and education are non-competitive benefits to which everyone is entitled.

Similarly, English (1978) differentiates scarce benefits from basic benefits such as 'health, the self-respect to be gained by doing one's best, the cooperation to be learned from working with teammates and the incentive gained from having opponents, the "character" of learning to be a good loser and a good winner, the chance to improve one's skills and learn to accept criticism – and just plain fun' (270). For English, as for Jacobs, everyone has an equal right to basic benefits; therefore, sport institutions must not allocate them through competitive processes, for only some individuals or social groups would be able to achieve such benefits. Justice issues arising from the allocation of basic benefits are fundamental in youth sport because of its intrinsic developmental and educative character. That is, youth sport should never be solely about athletic competition. Sport philosophers preoccupied with justice issues in youth sport must broaden the scope of their justice frameworks to account for a greater variety of justice problems, without restricting their focus to in-game situations. To what extent these claims apply to adult sport, especially those at the elite level, is beyond the scope of this paper.

In examining justice, political theorists have emphasized the importance of major social institutions with higher powers in allocating benefits and resources. For instance, in Rawls' theory of justice, major social institutions, such as the Constitution and the State, determine the distribution of the basic benefits he refers to as 'primary goods' (e.g., income and wealth, and social bases of self-respect). Although Rawls (2001) cautiously argues that justice principles regulating major institutions do not apply directly to all institutions and communities within a society, he indicates that such principles indirectly set constraints on what individuals can and must do within particular institutions and associations in the society (10–11). In his view, the distribution of basic benefits creates the background within which communities must operate. For instance, a society where children are entitled to the right to play must ensure that institutions and communities, regardless of their specific meanings and values, create conditions for children to enjoy this right.⁵

Elisabeth S. Anderson (1999) champions the view that the *point* of justice is to 'create a community in which people stand in relations of equality to others' (289). The emphasis of justice principles, thus, should be on the elimination of oppressing, exploitative, marginalizing, demeaning, and discriminatory relationships that prevent individuals from standing in relations of equality. For Anderson (1999), 'injustices may be better remedied by changing social norms and the structures of public good than by redistributing resources' (336). In this view, distributive principles are certainly important to justice, for they must ensure that individuals have access to certain benefits and opportunities to avoid falling into oppression, exploitation, marginalization, etc. However, distribution is hardly the point of justice. The development of human communities comprising equal individuals is.

Anderson's position heavily aligns with that of Iris Marion Young (1990), positing that oppression and domination, instead of distributive concerns, are the core of justice. Defining 'oppression' as 'the institutional constraint on self-development' and 'domination' as 'the institutional constraint on self-determination',⁶ Young's justice account brings to the fore structural phenomena – such as social rules, rights, procedures, meanings, and practices – that significantly affect people's ability to lead good lives. In her view, the good life comprises two fundamental aspects: '(1) developing and exercising one's capacities and experiencing one's experience . . . and (2) participating in determining one's action and the conditions of one's action' (37). These two fundamental aspects of good living are crucial in evaluating justice because, for Young, 'Justice entails that all persons have the opportunity to develop and exercise skills in socially recognized settings' (220). Therefore, she concludes, societies and institutions concerned with justice must 'seek to promote many values of social justice in addition to fairness in the distribution of goods: learning and using satisfying and expansive skills in socially recognized settings; participating in forming and running institutions, and receiving recognition for such participation; playing and communicating with others, and expressing our experience, feelings, and perspective on social life in contexts where others can listen' (37).

In articulating and applying her justice framework, Young (1990) considers the notion of 'social group' crucial. 'A social group is a collective of persons differentiated from at least one other group by cultural forms, practices, or way of life' (43). In consonance with Wall's views above, children also fit this categorization of a social group. Like injustice, groups are the result of social relations. Thus, children, as a social group, arise and exist in relation to other groups, such as parents and coaches, and structures or systems (e.g., youth sport).⁷ Because of their structural and relational character, social groups and the phenomena of oppression and domination become intertwined. Hence, Young (2001) argues that 'claims that some inequalities are unjust implicitly or explicitly compare groups in order to identify social structures that involuntarily position people, constraining some more than others and privileging some people more than others' (7).

Based on this discussion, philosophical analyses of justice issues in youth sport must focus on two aspects: a) the goals and logic of the activity and b) structural inequalities that result in oppressive and dominating influences of a specific social group (e.g., adults) over another social group (e.g., children) (Torres and Illundáin-Agurruza 2011). Any account of justice that overlooks one of these aspects would fall short of capturing the wide array of justice problems in the activity.

Features of a just youth sport

What follows is a series of general features that should be taken as ethical guidelines, but decidedly not as ready-made recipes, to conceive and

promote just structures and practices in youth sport. It should be noted that, given the different types of youth sport, the general features presented here are flexible enough for the adults involved to adapt them to the variety and complexity of youth sport. Some general features unavoidably overlap, but each stresses a distinctive and important element of justice in youth sport.

1) A just youth sport respects young athletes' interests and needs, and facilitates the pursuit of such interests and needs

A just youth sport is conducive to, using the language of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, 'the full and harmonious development of [children's] personality' (United Nations 1989). This necessarily includes respecting and fostering children's interests and needs. This covers, for instance, areas such as health, safety, and well-being. However, most broadly, while encompassing the latter, youth sport relates to children's concern in, following Schapiro's (1999, 2003) analysis of childhood, developing their rational will – an own voice – to establish their own authority in order to govern themselves. A just youth sport facilitates this process and has it as its main goal. This, it could be argued, is what it means to have a 'young athlete-centered approach'. Unsurprisingly, Siedentop (2002) argues that junior sport is to be supported primarily for the educational and developmental advantages it offers its participants. Thus, he questions 'the degree to which the elite-development goals of a junior sport system can be served as part of a comprehensive system and still direct sufficient resources to achieve the educative and public health goals' (396). In an important sense, the pursuit of athletic excellence in youth sport should never detract from or undermine children's efforts and concern in becoming autonomous agents. Tellingly, Siedentop (2002) proclaims that the development-related educative and public health goals, both basic benefits to which all participants are entitled, must predominate in a junior sport program. To this end, and if it is organized to promote children's autonomy, such a program 'would be as inclusive as possible, attractive to diverse children and youth, modified physically and emotionally to fit developing bodies, talents, and spirits, and administered and coached with the educative benefits clearly reflected' (394).

The overarching interest of children in becoming autonomous agents should be recognized and nurtured. A just youth sport does both by encouraging young athletes to exercise their increasing autonomy in matters that affect them. In this regard, Dennis Hemphill (2011) advocates allowing young athletes to exercise their decision-making capacities to facilitate the process through which they emerge as their own authority. Similarly, Cesar R. Torres and Peter F. Hager (2013) maintain that if youth sport is to help young athletes develop their autonomy, coaches, one of the most influential social groups in it, should allow them 'to make more of their own decisions on the

playing surface and during training sessions' because this shift in responsibility will contribute to the maturity of 'their abilities to think critically and imaginatively, and to take greater ownership in their decisions and the consequences that stem from them' (182).

Nurturing children's increasing autonomy implies that coaches and parents, the other two most influential social groups in youth sport, not only trust them, but also acknowledge their preferences, even if they are different from, or even contradict, those of these adults. From this, it does not follow that children's preferences should override other relevant considerations (specifically those that children might not be able or willing to acknowledge) in making decisions that concern them and their sport participation (see Torres 2015a). Their preferences, together with their increasing autonomy, should be included in the deliberative process. As Torres and Hager (2013) propose, 'the provision of opportunities for youths to develop their own authority demands that youth sport coaches [and other involved adults] gradually withdraw their authority. But they should remain available, supportive, and even protective of their young athletes as required by the situation' (182). This is a mighty way to empower youth athletes and move toward creating relations of equality. That young athletes' autonomy, along with their developmental interests and needs, is of utmost importance in a just youth sport does not mean that other benefits (e.g., competitive success and prizes, among others) are undeserving of considerable deference. It means, though, that their cultivation should not obstruct young athletes' quest for autonomy. This obstruction would be against justice, understood as the creation of a community of equals.

2) A just youth sport promotes the development of relationships as non-hierarchical and horizontal as possible

Parental involvement is sometimes a key positive force in youth sport (Fredricks and Eccles 2005). Other times, however, parents' engagement affects youth sport negatively. Scholars have identified parents' and coaches' emphasis on victory or, more broadly, the promotion of the 'sport ethic' as a key damaging force (Budziszewski 2019). Performance-oriented adults create hegemonic and hierarchical structures of status wherein parents, coaches, and successful athletes (i.e., those who meet adults' expectations) occupy privileged positions. These structures detrimentally affect young athletes by inhibiting performance, creating competitive stress, promoting antisocial behaviors, and increasing youth athlete dropout (Bean et al. 2016). For instance, when victory is the focus, competitive goals typically take precedence over developmental ones, and young athletes often relate to one another based on competitive parameters. Young athletes criticize and exclude their low-performing peers. In contrast, they celebrate and include high-performing colleagues (Budziszewski 2019; Holt et al. 2019).

Youth sport scholars note that dropout rates have consistently increased in the last decade, a trend the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated (The Aspen Institute 2021). When surveyed about dropout decisions, youth athletes prominently identify performance-related reasons as the causes for ceasing their engagement in youth sport. These reasons include, but are not limited to, absence of fun, anxiety about underperforming, fear of criticism, pressure from coaches and parents, and lack of playing time (Witt and Dangi 2018). Young athletes also report a misalignment between performance-oriented goals and their own interests. For most of them, the emphasis for participating in sport is on playing, having fun, and spending time with friends (Fraser-Thomas et al. 2008).⁸

The mismatch between young athletes' preferences and expected goals in youth sport indicates that the adults in charge of coaching, administering, managing, supervising, and officiating often ignore young athletes' interests and needs. Because adults have fiduciary duties towards minors and have practiced and been involved in sport longer, they must adopt guiding roles to assist young athletes to better benefit from their engagement in sport. This is particularly important regarding the prevention of harm (i.e., how to best practice sport to avoid getting injured or injuring someone else) and the development of skills (i.e., how to become more proficient). Thus, adults may justifiably exert greater control over youth in sport settings that include increased risk and danger and/or require intense training and competition. However, as David (2005) explains, a 'very thin line divides ... training that allows children to fulfil themselves from that in which they are abused and exploited' (53).

Following the justice framework proposed in this paper, a more just youth sport requires countering hegemonic and hierarchical relationships and favors horizontal relationships among all relevant social groups involved. The former type of relationship promotes the creation of oppressive and dominating influences by a social group or individuals with a privileged social status (i.e., parents, coaches, and performance-minded young athletes) over another social group or individuals (i.e., fun-oriented participants). Reducing the emphasis on performance-oriented goals in favor of development-centered ones is critical in promoting non-hierarchical and horizontal relationships. Practices classifying children into different groups based on performance promote the separation of young athletes into hierarchical groups. Those that come at the top enjoy greater opportunities to advance their interests (e.g., playing time) and benefit from the goods resulting from engaging in youth sport (e.g., attention from adults and self-esteem). Those in lower hierarchical levels have fewer opportunities to develop through their engagement in youth sport, which eventually leads them to drop out.

As Torres, in collaboration with Jesús Ilundáin-Agurruza, argues, the promotion of shared decision-making processes is paramount in developing more horizontal relationships in sport and in promoting athletes' opportunities to become more autonomous. These processes 'facilitate the joint determination of sports

objectives as well as the means necessary to achieve them, which extends from the organization of training sessions to the tactics implemented in competition. Likewise, the rules of coexistence and disciplinary sanctions are established through democratic procedures' (Torres and Ilundáin-Agurruza 2011, 32). As they encourage individuals to treat each other as equals, these are the kinds of relationships a just youth sport should build and foster.

3) In a just youth sport, adults embrace their negative and positive obligations to materialize 1) and 2)

As explained above, Schapiro (1999) contends that, while children have a primary responsibility in developing their rational will, adults have negative and positive obligations to facilitate this process. Given the multiple and pivotal roles adults assume in youth sport, ensuring that they meet these obligations is especially important in this domain of children's lives. Paraphrasing Schapiro (1999), negatively, adults must refrain from hindering young athletes' tireless efforts in establishing a perspective they can adopt as their own and become effective agents. Thus, adults 'should not, for example, force children to rely on adult authority on matters they are capable of deciding for themselves' (735–736). Instances of breaches of these negative duties include disregarding young athletes' reasons for engaging in sport and pressuring them to concentrate mainly on performance-centered goals. Once children have achieved significant mastery in some domain, adults should remove, or at least relax, their control over children. On this point, Torres and Hager (2013) explain that 'As youths' dependence shrinks, the domains over which they exercise and rely on their own authority expand' (176), and that expanding autonomy should not be tampered with.

In terms of their positive obligations, adults should actively embrace the positive duties to foster the process by which children expand their autonomy. Citing Schapiro (1999) again, adults are required to 'make it our end to help children overcome their dependent condition. In nurturing, disciplining, and educating children, we must strive as far as possible to make them aware of their natural authority and power over themselves and of its proper exercise' (736). That is, children should be given opportunities to fulfill and increase their expanding autonomy. John S. Russell (2007) puts it this way: 'Generally, [children's wishes to] and striving to test or "to try on" adult responsibilities and capacities is to be encouraged because it is part of learning to be and become an adult' (185). That is why it is paramount that adults model autonomy and be willing to allow, and design practices that encourage, young athletes to make rules and decisions for themselves when they have the capacity to do so (Schapiro 1999, 736). To embrace their positive obligations, adults should spend significant quantities of time getting to know their young charges and what they can succeed at in sport. Only by knowing their young athletes' strengths and weaknesses, and by

deliberating with them, can adults more productively assist children in widening their quest for autonomy through and in sport.

4) A just youth sport fosters opportunities for the proper allocation of basic and scarce benefits

As noted above, several philosophers (English 1978; Jacobs 2004) contend that the basic benefits of sport participation should not be allocated through competitive processes. In other words, they should be available to all sport participants. Because of its developmental potential, this is especially important in youth sport. After all, as argued in this paper, justice in sport demands considering the allocation of basic benefits. Thus, all willing young athletes, not only the most talented or driven, should have meaningful opportunities to be in situations in which they can benefit from attributes such as health, self-respect, and self-affirmation, and learn qualities such as ‘cooperation, leadership skills, submerging individual interests to collective goal and perseverance’ (Siedentop 2002, 53) in addition to courage, overcoming adversity, accepting criticism, recognizing one’s weaknesses and strengths, dealing with victory and defeat, and enjoying the process of contesting, among many others. Notice that all these qualities and attributes are compatible, if not needed, to foster autonomy.⁹

It is worth highlighting that offering all children meaningful opportunities to acquire the basic benefits of sport participation is a requirement grounded on the recognition of equal standing or equality, which is not only important for young athletes to develop, but also a necessary condition for the functioning of just cooperative enterprises. Just cooperative relationships build upon people’s willingness to work together to achieve common goals, which in turn heavily depends on feelings of mutual recognition and equal moral standing.

On the other hand, the allocation of scarce benefits, as English (1978) explains, also plays a fundamental role in the promotion of just cooperative enterprises. Receiving significantly different shares of scarce benefits often negatively affects people’s relationships of mutual recognition, development of self-respect, and engagements with others. Consider deliberative practices. Individuals who achieve greater levels of scarce benefits enter deliberative spaces in an advantageous position, having greater opportunities to affect the course and outcome of such deliberation (Lupia and Norton 2017). For instance, if discussing a team decision, young players enjoying more playing time would tend to be in a superior dialogical position than those who see restricted playing time. A just youth sport must ensure that benefits are allocated to favor the development of non-hierarchical, horizontal relationships among participants, especially between those who typically hold privileged positions (e.g., adults) and those who do not (e.g., children).

Conclusion

In this paper, we critically analyze youth sport to identify general features to facilitate its development as a just social arrangement. To do so, we recognize the specificity of childhood and the unique purposes of youth sport, concluding that the latter is better understood as an educative and developmental activity. Then, by drawing on examinations of justice, we have conceptualized a just youth sport as an enterprise wherein adults collaborate to promote children's quest to achieve autonomy and empower them to promote their interests and needs and encourage the creation of a community of equals. In other words, to put it negatively, a just youth sport requires forming a network of relationships without structural inequalities that produce oppressive and dominating influences of a specific social group (e.g., adults) over another social group (e.g., children). From this analysis, we have derived four general features that a just youth sport should embody: it ought to 1) respect young athletes' interests and needs and facilitate the pursuit of such interests and needs; 2) promote the development of relationships as non-hierarchical and horizontal as possible; 3) ensure that adults embrace their negative and positive obligations to materialize general features 1) and 2); and 4) foster opportunities for the proper allocation of basic and scarce benefits. In explaining these general features, we have identified deliberative practices as one of the main processes, albeit not the only one, whereby youth sport can become more just. By engaging in these processes, young athletes enter non-hierarchical and horizontal relationships with other members of the youth sport community, including those who typically benefit from positions of privilege; express and advance their interests and needs; and participate in shared decision-making concerning the allocation of youth sport's opportunities, resources, and benefits.

Notes

1. For a history of organized youth sport in the United States, see, for example, Wiggins (2013). The essays in Kristiansen, Parent, and Houlihan (2017) analyze the emergence and growth of elite organized youth sport across fifteen countries in four continents. For simplicity's sake, throughout the paper we will refer to organized youth sport simply as youth sport.
2. A historical comment on the adoption of this treaty and its predecessors is found in Tobin (2019).
3. See the essays in Kristiansen, Parent, and Houlihan (2017).
4. See also, for example, Kretchmar (2019) and Kretchmar and Elcombe (2007).
5. For a robust analysis of children's rights claims in sport, see David (2005).
6. Young (1990) further defines 'oppression' as 'systematic institutional processes which prevent people from learning and using satisfying and expansive skills in socially recognized settings' and 'domination' as 'structural or systemic

phenomena which exclude people from participating in determining their actions' (38 and 31).

7. For an in-depth analysis of youth sport systems, see Dorsch et al. (2022).
8. These experiences vary across countries, depending on the prevalence and strength of performance-oriented attitudes (Strandbu et al. 2019).
9. A complete exploration of the complex relationship between the basic (and scarce) benefits of youth sport and children's interests and needs exceeds the goal of this paper. However, it is important to clarify that while the basic (and scarce) benefits of youth sport are derived from participating in it, children's interests and needs are inherent to their condition *qua* children and are, thus, shared by all children.

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