

# Understanding the Role of Sport in Enhancing Self-esteem among High School and College Athletes in Malaysia: Some Initial Postulations

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## ABSTRACT

*The purpose of this study is to examine the extent to which involvement in sporting activities improves the self-esteem of young athletes. Further, it investigates the impact participation has on different aspects of the self. Eight athletes from Bukit Jalil Sports School and six undergraduate athletes from the Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) volunteered for the study. Drawing on the hermeneutic philosophy of Ricoeur, the researchers developed a methodological approach that requested the participants to narrate how their involvement in sports had enhanced their self-esteem. The narrative texts were content analyzed and the results obtained showed that participation in sports had impacted positively in the enhancement of self-esteem in a number of key ways. The findings show that a high value is attached to a range of competencies related to social acceptance, educational health attainment, success in sport and issues pertaining to physicality. The paper argues that further research involving longitudinal designs based on large representative samples is needed to investigate attitude changes in more depth. In this regard the authors suggest the need for a 'sport for all' strategy for developing a more sustainable 'sport participation culture' in Malaysia.*

**Key words:** *Self-esteem, sport concept, exercise, attitude change in sports, and enhancing sports participation.*

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With regard to that aspect of the self or domain that relates to physical activity, the study of self-esteem has focused primarily on participation in activity programs involving sport, dance and fitness (Ebbeck & Stuart, 1993). And it has become somewhat of a truism to suggest that amongst children and adolescents participating in physical activities results in a general improvement in self-esteem (Ebbeck & Stuart, 1996). Consequently, researchers and practitioners have maintained an ongoing interest in the development of self-esteem in sports and physical activity (e.g., Fox, 2002; Sonstroem, 1984; Sonstroem & Morgan, 1989). There is no doubt that the association between high self-esteem and the desirable outcomes such as positive self-regard, motivation and achievement has stimulated this interest (Brustad, 1988).

The idea of self-esteem is concerned with the ways in which individuals feel and evaluate their sense of self, of being a person, including the degree to which they have a positive regard for themselves, otherwise described as self-respect and self-concept. To this extent it can be argued that self-esteem relates to two esteem 'needs': on the one hand the desire for competence and on the other a desire for recognition (Maslow, 1970). Corsini (1984) identified self-esteem as 'the sense of personal worth and competence that people associate with their self-concepts.' According to Corsini it refers to the "liking of one's self", a feeling of importance to others and the ability to evaluate one's own capabilities and shortcomings. Another author has suggested that individuals develop a "success" identity versus a "failure" identity, depending on their view of their self-concept (Glasser, 1965).

Self-esteem is the totality of one's self-confidence, self-worth and self-respect. Self-esteem has also been described as "the degree to which individuals feel positive about themselves" (Gussis, 1971), or have a "personal judgment of worthiness" (Coopersmith, 1967). However one chooses to define it, the fundamental nature of self-esteem is based on the notion of self-understanding, and the ability to accept and like oneself as one is. High self-esteem is important because it provides a foundation for the individual to deal with life's many

challenges. Improving one's self-esteem especially in sport setting can give the individual the confidence, strength and resilience to face and overcome many obstacles. The key to self-esteem in sport is developing self-acceptance and feelings of competence and participation in physical activity and exercise has a great deal of potential for developing both (Sonstroem & Morgan, 1989).

The major obstacle facing Malaysian sport and adolescent athletes, in particular, is that the efficacy of promoting self-esteem among participants is still not seen as significant among coaches (Omar-Fauzee, 2005). It would appear that the majority of coaches in Malaysia assume that if athletes perform, they already have the key determinants of self-esteem (Omar-Fauzee, 2005). But evidence suggests that this is not really the case (Omar-Fauzee, 2005). Thus, present study set out to identify and examine the key factors that have the most significant influences on the self-esteem and competence of young Malaysian athletes. The respondents were drawn from two samples: upper secondary students and undergraduate athletes.

### **Considering the Evidence from Extant Studies**

Psychological evidence (i.e., Jeziorski, 1999; Weiss, 1999) suggests that the major pay-offs from playing in tournaments does not come from gaining stronger biceps and better hand-eye coordination, but from gaining self-esteem and motivation among child athletes. Weiss and her colleagues at University of Oregon have conducted more than 60 studies on how participation in physical activity and sports affect youths' social and psychological development. Her work in the early 1990's reveals a close association between motivation, high self-esteem and sport participation. Weiss (1999) sums up her findings as follows: Physical activity and sports have tremendous potential to enhance children's self-esteem and motivation. Her research has consistently demonstrated that self-esteem and perceptions of physical ability can predict achievement behavior, motivation and other positive effects. For example, the research found that children who under-estimated their abilities were less motivated and experienced more anxiety than those who estimated their capabilities accurately, and that the positive and negative experiences in sports are directly related to self-esteem and motivation for future involvement.

Exercise and physical fitness have been commonly associated with the improvement of overall psychological well-being and the enhancement of self-esteem (Fox, 2002; Heaps, 1978; Sonstroem, 1984; Sonstroem & Morgan, 1989). Although research has supported the positive relationship between exercise and psychological well-being, it remains unclear as to what exactly the mechanism is that causes this phenomenon (Lavallee, Kramer, Moran, & Williams, 2004; Morgan, 1985). Furthermore, research conducted by Leith and Taylor (1990) has provided inconsistent results as to whether or not actual changes in physical fitness are requisite for these improvements in psychological well-being to exist. Sonstroem (1984) has proposed that, it may be that the person's perceptions or attitude about her physical fitness rather than the actual fitness itself that is related to favorable emotional adjustment. Moreover, Fox (1988) has cited several studies, which report similar results between sports/exercise participation and self-esteem. And it would appear that personal competence, feelings of capability to master and control oneself and aspects of the environment are essential dimensions of self-esteem. It has also been found that self-acceptance is an important dimension of favorable self-esteem. The adolescent who struggles to establish his or her self-identity seeks love (affection), self-acceptance and sense of competence. Sports participation can contribute much to enhance these elements that are regarded as especially important during adolescence.

There is also evidence that suggests that physical estimation is correlated to self-esteem (Heaps, 1978; Sonstroem & Morgan, 1989). For example, when comparing actual to perceived fitness level of male undergraduate college students, Heaps (1978) found that the subjects' estimates of their fitness was only marginally related to their actual fitness levels, whereas stronger coefficients were observed between perceived fitness and self-esteem. These results indicate that psychological well-being may be more dependent upon the subjective evaluation of an individual's fitness level rather than objective fitness measures. All of this points to the conclusion that perceptions of fitness can strongly influence self-esteem, whereas actual levels of fitness or physical activity often hold less sway.

A study by Ebbeck and Weiss (1998) examined perceived sport competence and the effects experienced in sport as possible determinants

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of children's levels of self-esteem. The sample consisted of 183 summer sport program participants ranging in age from 8 to 16 years. The children completed self-report questionnaires that assessed the constructs of their interest. The hypothesized relationships among the constructs were then examined using structural equation modeling techniques. The results revealed that both the structural models tested provided an adequate fit with the sample data. For the effect mediator model, perceived competence significantly influenced positive effects and to a lesser degree negative affects; while only the positive effects influenced self-esteem. The research revealed too that self-acceptance is an important dimension of favorable self-esteem and those adolescents who struggle to establish their individual self-identity seeks love (affection), self-acceptance and sense of competence.

Furthermore, Pelham and Swann (1989) investigated perceived competence and its effects as predictor of self-esteem. Specifically, they examined the contribution of multiple factors on the self-esteem of male and female college undergraduate students. These factors included perceptions of competence or adequacy for each of 10 personal attributes, such as academic ability, artistic ability, sport competence and physical attractiveness. Each subject's ratings on these 10 attributes were collated to form a composite perceived competence score. Positive effect was defined as the extent to which individuals had experienced positive emotions (e.g., pride, enthusiasm), and negative affect represented the extent to which individuals had experienced negative emotions (e.g., fear, hostility) during the last week. Results of a multiple regression analysis revealed that the perceived competence, positive effect and negative affect scores all significantly predicted self-esteem.

The final study important to the present analysis and which is an approach that has received a good deal of attention in psychology research is work which has explored the relationship between self-worth and self-esteem and overt behavior (Harter, 1986). Research has shown that the way people evaluate their involvement in different settings or domains relates to their overall self-perception or evaluation of themselves. Such theory has given rise to Shavelson, Hubner and Stanton's (1976) hierarchical models of self-worth, and thus, identified that a person's general or global self-worth is a function of self-perception in different aspects of the self, identified by psychologists as domains. Several domains

have been identified as relating to the general, super-ordinate construct of general or global self-worth. Harter (1986) concluded that there are five domains that children between the ages of 8 and 16 years can differentiate between, which includes scholastic competence, athletic competence, peer and social acceptance, behavioral conduct and physical conduct.

We have demonstrated in this literature review that although the idea of self-esteem has been explored in some depth in the psychology literature, there has been little empirical attention given to this area of research in sport and exercise, especially in Malaysia (Omar-Fauzee, 2005). As a response to this lack of research, the present study was conducted to identify the extent to which involvement in sport activities improves self-esteem. And in this regard its primary objective was to investigate the factors that are most influential in improving self-esteem among upper secondary students and undergraduates in sport and exercise activities.

## **Methodology**

### **Participants**

Twenty-five respondents were randomly selected and asked to narrate their experiences of the ways in which their involvement in sports had enhanced their self-esteem. Of the initial 25 respondents, only 14 replied. The 14 respondents were made up of eight Bukit Jalil Sports School athletes (Mean age = 16.5; sd = 1.2) and five physical education undergraduate students at the Universiti Putra Malaysia (Mean age = 21.5, sd = 1.4). They consisted of 8 male and 6 female athletes ranging from 17 to 23 years of age. All of them were still single. All the respondents comprised of athletes participating in either individual or team sports.

### **Procedure**

This narrative study aimed to identify whether involvement in sport activities improved self-esteem and investigate the major factors that played an influence. As the work of Ricoeur (1984) shows, through the

process of narration, individuals are able to ‘grasp together’ and integrate into a whole the constituent parts of multiple and scattered life-events in order to establish the ‘healthy circle’ which portrays the positive features of their individual lives. With these discursive insights in mind, respondents were requested to narrate how involvement in sports had improved their self-esteem.

In terms of the pragmatics of the project, each respondent had to sign an informed consent letter so as to allow the researchers to quote the respondents in their study. The contents were then retyped and sent back to the respondents for validation. The validated narrative texts were then contented analyzed by the researchers.

## **Results and Discussions**

The results obtained showed that most of the respondents’ participation in sports had positively shown an impact in the improvement of their self-esteem. A high value was attached to the following general domain ranks: sporting ability, social acceptance, educational and health attainment, success at their respective games, and physical attractiveness (Figure 1). These are all tied to self-esteem, to that extent that with improved competence comes a sense of effectiveness, feelings of self-determination and personal control.

### **Sporting Ability**

It is widely acknowledged that mastery of skills through involvement in sports increases physical ability, which raises one’s physical self-estimation and leads to enhanced self-esteem (Palmer, 1992). The better skill that an individual athlete perceives that he or she has mastered, the better they can perform in games and thus it helps to increase their self-esteem in the games. The statement made by a respondent listed below supports this assertion:

*“My involvement in sport has trained me to be more responsible. Like me, every member of the team has specific responsibility. We play our role to the best of our ability for the success of the team. This year I feel even better because I have been made the captain*

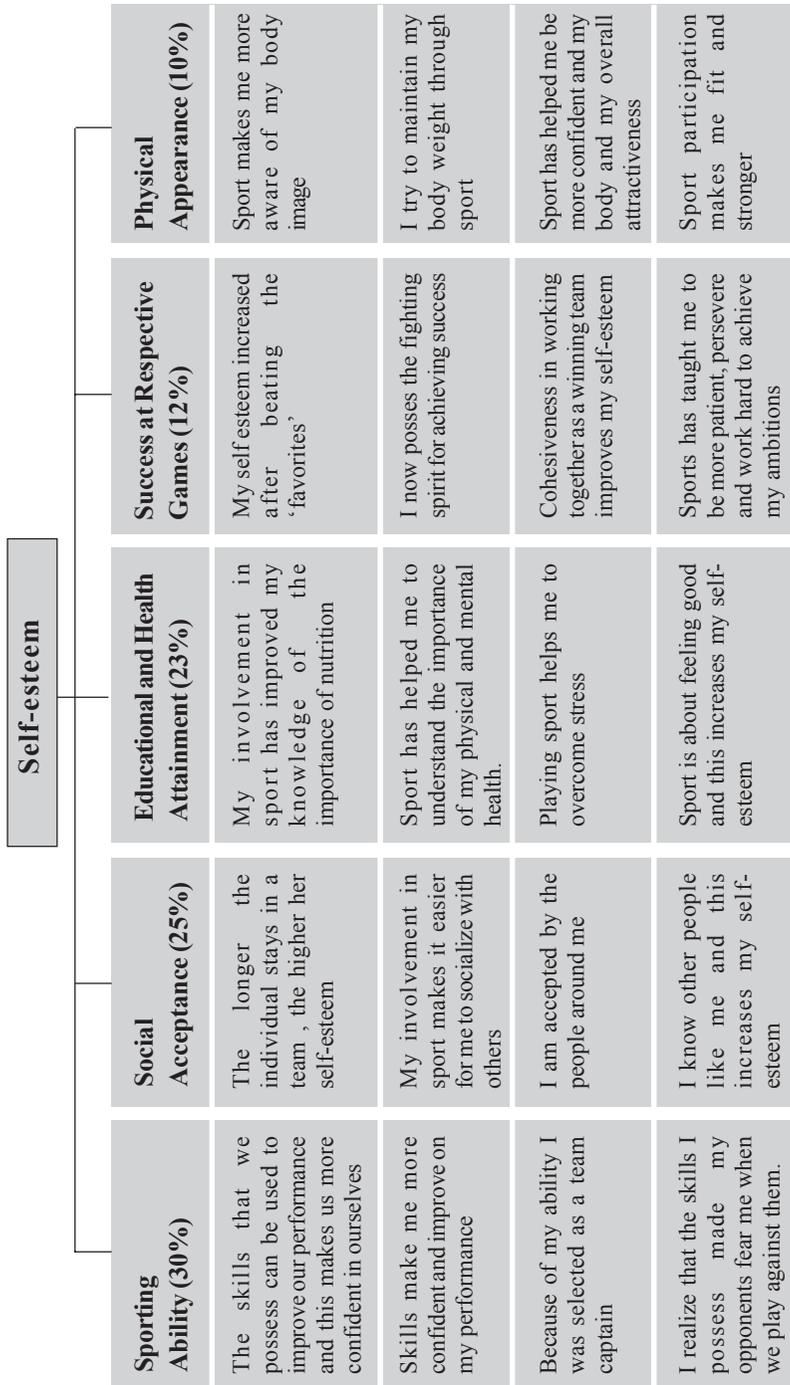


Figure 1: Selected Raw Data, Dimensions and Themes Relating to Self-esteem among the Respondents.

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*of the team, perhaps based on my good skills and behavior. This made me realize the responsibility of a leader and I have learnt so much about team organization and communicating with other people and my responsibility as the captain. I have also learnt how to deal with team problems and to keep the team together as one unit.”*

The above statement shows that individual with high skill was not only being respected by fellow team members, but by their coach as well. Thus, their ability has made them more responsible to their team to achieve success, and thus, increase their self-esteem. Another athlete made a similarly argument:

*“The skill that we possess can be used to improve our performance and this makes us more confident in ourselves. From my experience, I have come to realize that the skill I possess made my opponents fear me when we played against them. This also made me feel more confident of myself and thus improved my performance.”*

We can see that as their confidence increases, individual performances also improve and thus it helps them to feel self-worth and self-pride about themselves. This is because as people with high self-esteem take pride in their ability, they can continue to improve their skills, thereby maintaining a higher performance level. In turn a high level of skill mastery provides self-confidence in performing the tasks and achieving success through one's ability leads to improved self-esteem. A review by Ledwidge (1980) suggests that endurance training improves self-respect by means of “the sense of accomplishment that occurs when someone confronts a difficult physical and psychological challenge and overcomes it”. Similarly, Shephard (1994) maintains that an increase in self-esteem, as well as restoration of an internal locus of control, occurs when an individual masters a difficult physical skill. Hence, these findings suggest that high school coaches should focus more on improving athlete's basic skills to ensure they will go on to hone the more advanced skills that lead to increased self-esteem.

## **Social Acceptance**

Social acceptance was the second most important factor that the respondents argued increased their self-esteem. It is well established in the literature that humans have a need to sense social significance as reflected by feelings of power, importance, relatedness, belonging, love, worthiness and unconditional worth (Fox, 2000). This research suggests that this social need also provides a further route to establishing positive self-esteem enhancement. As one of our respondents put it:

*“We as a team always does things together even outside our training hours. We have a good time doing things together, we never feel depressed or lonely and we find it easier to socialize with other people, as well as to adapt easily to new situations. Simply said, I think that the longer a person is involved in sport activities, the higher will be his / her self-esteem.”*

In other words, being a part of the teams enables athletes to feel more sociable and altogether happier, this leads to increase self-esteem. The research also indicates that athletes who are also students who have examinations and home work search for freedom through other outlets that will increase their self-confidence as well as self-esteem. The research suggests that through sports they gain the respect and are able to socialize with teammates, other athletes, and supporters, which always makes them feel more motivated and leads to even greater self-esteem in their work. Reviews by Leith (1994) have shown that involvement in physical activities and sport improved sense of belonging and significance through relationships with team members and others in exercise groups. The enhancement of self-esteem gives student athletes more self-confidence to interact not only with the society, but also in overcoming their everyday problems associated with studying. The research seems to suggest that their participation sporting activities better enables them to be more socialized people especially in working as part of a team.

## **Educational and Health Attainment**

There is evidence, too, that cognitively oriented behavior can help promote positive self-esteem. Indeed, the third most important self-esteem factor

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for this particular set of respondents was educational and health attainment and the way these enable athletes better performers. The research suggests that these particular respondents seek more knowledge in order to gain self-esteem so that they can move forward to perform at their best. Meichenbaum (1977) states that individuals tend to use the knowledge of covert speech and visual imagery to help guide and direct their behavior. People wishing to improve their self-esteem/self-concept can learn to prompt themselves with self-statements, such as “I’m just as good as the next person” or “Today, I’m going to feel really good about myself”. Four respondents stated that there were real improved educational and health benefits in sport which not only enabled them to gain more knowledge but also lead to enhanced self-esteem. As one respondent put it:

*“My own involvement in sports has improved my health, fitness and strength. But I know we can improve our health through good eating habits. An athlete should consume a balanced diet. Good health can also be maintained through exercise. Through exercise, there is better blood circulation and this makes a person more active. Feeling good improves self-esteem and sport certainly works this way for me”*

Another respondent put it this way:

*“Sports participation helps me reduce stress. I have learnt to reduce stress by using techniques learnt from sport psychology. I have also learned to control my arousal level during competition. Normally, during competition, athletes feel tensed. As a hockey player, whenever I’m tensed, I talk to myself to motivate myself using phrases like, “I can” or “Don’t give up”. This is one reason why sedentary people are easily stressed up compared to athletes because athletes like me know how to overcome stress”*

One of the respondents argued that their involvement in sport helped them keep up with knowledge about health issues, which they suggested enhanced their self-esteem in a number of ways:

*My involvement in sports has improved my knowledge on the importance of nutrition. Before this, I ate as and when I felt like eating and I also eat anything I liked. But now I am conscious of*

*what I eat and only consume nutritious food. I have also started to avoid junk food.*

Although their interests in the ways participating in sport improves their performance was their main interest, the research also shows that through their participation individuals' knowledge of healthy living (e.g. eating habits, stress reduction) come together as one. It is apparent, as Hausenblas (1998), has argued that participation in sport increases positive emotions as a whole and it is not unreasonable to suggest those who have weight problems or eating disorders may waste a lot of money and diet supplements and the like, because their knowledge of the potential for positive eating habits developed through sport is lacking. It seems that whether individuals realize it or not, issues relating to their participation in physical activity and sports (i.e. knowledge of eating habits, skill mastery, their successful performance, or physical appearance) do contribute to their self-esteem. It would seem that the better athletes are always plan their diets knowing that they will improve their self-esteem to achieve their goals

In relation to this last point there is also a good deal of evidence that how individuals think determines how they feel (Burns, 1980). With self-statement thoughts such as these, there is a good chance that improved self-esteem will result. The main idea is that positive self-statements and positive imagery become internalized as a way of thinking which elevates the individual's self-esteem (Fox, 2000). There is also evidence to suggest that the benefits of physical fitness contribute to mental health and overcoming distress among athletes. In terms of the Malaysian context, we want to suggest that more promotion should be done to encourage 'mass exercise participation' rather than merely focusing on the elite athletes programs. However, this is not to say that the development of Olympic 'elite athletes' program for Malaysians (who had not won any medals in the Olympic Athens, 2004) should not be strategically planned in 20 years time (i.e. Olympic 2024). But an Olympic elite athlete strategic plan can only be reinforced forward, if only a baseline level of a 'sport participating culture' is at the same time succeeding. Then, there is not only 'value for money' to be had but more Malaysians will have been 'educated' in such a way that will lead to Malaysia developing as a recognized 'sport culture'.

## **Success at Their Respective Games**

Studies by Gill and Strom (1985) have suggested that there is a relationship between certain qualitative elements of exercise and self-esteem. They randomly assigned 137 girls aged 11 through 14 to one of three treatment groups. Group 1 participated in an aerobic fitness program involving cooperation; Group 2 participated in an aerobic fitness program but the girls had to compete with one another (no cooperation); and the third group participated in a recreational volleyball control group. At the conclusion of the six-week program, only the cooperative group demonstrated improvements in self-esteem and the competitive group actually experienced reduced self-esteem. This research provides clear evidence that learning to work together as a team helps improve self-esteem which in turn leads to better team performance and success. Findings from this study also support this research. As one of our respondents put it:

*“Playing sport has taught me to be patient, persevere and work hard to achieve my ambitions. I now have a more positive outlook and possess high fighting spirit in achieving my successes. Our team is a success and this comes when we beat other teams; it terms of my self-esteem I perform better for the next game...and I am not be the same person when we lose.”*

Another respondent suggested that:

*“As a student I know that my positive emotional state is factor that helps improve my self-esteem. As a person who is part of a team I know that positive thinking and maturity work together to bring success. This is proven from my own experience where once my team had to play against the favorites of the tournament. But due to our positive thinking that we were better, we managed to achieve success. Even though our opponents were better and stronger, we knew that we did not have to fear them.*

Last but not least, a male respondent suggested that:

*“The most successful experiences I have gained from my involvement in sports have also helped to improve my self-esteem because they have enabled to better gauge my abilities which has in turn made me*

*much more confident. I am also more able to relate my successful experiences in sport to my everyday life. I now have more confidence and belief in my abilities.*

All of the above statements show that the experience of winning helps to improve an individual's self-esteem, but as importantly helps to improve their self-concept and self-motivation to perform better in the future. The findings demonstrate too that an individual's self-esteem can be negatively affected when they perform badly, and researchers need to further examine the implications of this in more detail. The more sport scientists are able to understand why, what, how, and when people are affected will help to strategize a proper 'stress management training' among athletes.

### **Physical Attractiveness**

There is a wealth of evidence that suggests that body image is intimately connected to self-image (Fisher, 1968; Ensel, 1991), and it is not surprising to find that when one's body image and body functioning improve through physical activity, there is frequently an improvement in one's self image as well. This research suggests that adolescent and young adult athletes feel that it is important for them to keep physically fit *and* maintain their physical attractiveness. The findings suggest that this means 'fit' and 'strong' for young men and 'aesthetically' attractive for young women. It appears that being in the school and university has a major impact on physical attractiveness due to peer group pressure and social environmental conditions. What is also apparent is that perception of body weight is an appropriate factor in how young women feel about their attractiveness. Statements made by the female athletes to the researchers' supports this:

*"Involvement in sport has made me more aware of my body image and how to make myself look more attractive. I try to maintain an ideal body weight so that I don't look too fat or too thin"*

Another female athlete said:

*"From a physical point of view, involvement in sport enables female athletes to develop a more feminine appearance, like a model. These*

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*athletes are more self-confident, daring, active and react more quickly to lots of things. With this type of image they look more attractive and feel more easily noticed by other people.”*

While, a male athlete told a rather different story:

*“Through sport participation my overall health and well-being has improved. The physical and weight training has made me healthy and stronger. Sport has also made me more confident of myself and has improved my mental and physical strength”*

The previous argument notwithstanding, the above statements show that athletes, regardless of gender, believe that their self-confidence increases and improves as their physical attractiveness (fit and strong for male; attractive for female) increases. Studies by Henderson (1974) reported that this points to an overall improvement in self-esteem / body image after a physical development program. Thus, the more active the individual, the easier they can maintain a body image that is perceived to be highly desirable. Similarly, a review by Sonstroem (1984), investigating the causal effect of exercise on self-esteem concluded that participation in physical activities appears to be associated with improved self-esteem scores. To this extent, it was found that being single and between the ages of 17 and 23 years old it is perceived that exercise and physical attractiveness go together and lead to greater self-confidence and ultimately more self-esteem.

## **Conclusion**

This study was designed to investigate how involvement in sports can enhance self-esteem. The qualitative results of this study supported the notion that participation in exercise and sport does help to improve self-esteem among college and secondary school students. Hence, it also led to justify Lavalley et al. (2004) suggestions of further study regarding the use of exercise and physical activity to improve self-esteem. Moreover, Fox (1988) and Sonstroem (1984) have cited studies which report similar conclusions. Personal competences, feelings of capability to master and control oneself and aspects of the environment have been identified as essential dimensions in this process. This research has demonstrated too

that acceptance is also a crucial factor in developing greater self-esteem. The research has demonstrated too that an adolescent who struggles to establish his / her self-identity seeks love (affection), self-acceptance and sense of competence. Sports participation can contribute much to enhance these elements, which are regarded highly during adolescence.

Body image during adolescence was found to be positively associated with athletic ability and social status. Furthermore, there is evidence (Deci & Ryan, 1985) that motor coordination and mastery of skills is positively related to self-confidence, and adolescents satisfied with their appearance develop positive body image. We can conclude, therefore, that improved perception of self-confidence and body image contributes substantially to the creation of positive self-esteem and social acceptance. Physical skills, fitness and sport competencies are also important to many, especially youngsters as they grow and make comparisons with their peers.

This paper has also shown that exercise and sports participation are associated with more positive self-perceptions and evidence from intervention studies shows clearly that exercise/sport participation helps people feel better about themselves and this contributes to their mental well-being and presumably their quality of life. This suggests that health professionals and physical educators should consider physical activity as an important element of health promotion.

In terms of athletes in Malaysia, the key lesson is that they should be better encouraged to gain more education attainment for their better understanding of the benefits of sports, especially for their long terms health, associated skills, and sports performance. The research indicates that in addition, improved self-esteem can be an important marker of recovery from symptoms of depression and anxiety (Fox, 2000). Similarly, physical self-worth has been shown to be independently associated with elements of well being and should provide an important benchmark for success. Further research involving longitudinal designs based on larger representative samples should also be considered to investigate attitude changes related to sports participation. It is also recommended that research on the 'sport culture development mentality' in Malaysia should be conducted in near future, so as to explore the necessary steps required in order to develop a more elemental culture of self-esteem in sport

participation which would be to the benefit of all and not just elite performers.

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