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# 1           **What Makes Teenagers Continue? A Salutogenic Approach to**

## 2           **Understanding Youth Participation in Swedish Club Sports**

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4

5           International studies have revealed that some of the reasons that young people engage  
6 in sports are because of friends, the enjoyment of participation, and the ability to feel healthy  
7 (MacPhail, Gorely and Kirk 2003; Allender, Cowburen and Foster 2006; Light, Harvey and  
8 Memmert 2011). MacPhail et al. (2003) suggested that enjoyment and fun are prominent  
9 reasons for young people's participation in club sports, and it is argued that sport should be  
10 joyful and provide both recreational and elite investment (Côté and Hay 2002; Siedentop  
11 2002; Green 2006; Swedish Sports Confederation 2011a<sup>i</sup>). To provide a greater understanding  
12 of why some young people continue to participate in club sports, MacPhail (2012) suggested  
13 that further research should be conducted using qualitative methods to get in-depth insight  
14 into individuals' experiences and perceptions of club sports (see also for example, Thomas,  
15 Nelson and Silverman 2005). The intention in this article is to let young people's own voices  
16 be heard regarding why they participate in sports clubs (see also Light 2008; Wright and  
17 Macdonald 2010; O'Sullivan and MacPhail 2010).

18           In Sweden, many children participate in club sports during their childhood or youth,  
19 but many drop out in their late teens (Franzén and Peterson 2004; Trondman 2005; Blomdahl  
20 and Elofsson 2006; Thedin Jakobsson et al. 2012). Furthermore, few children take up sports  
21 after twelve years of age (Thedin Jakobsson et al. 2012). Why do some youngsters stay and  
22 what can we learn from that? Rather than concentrating on those who drop out of club sports  
23 (see, for example, Franzén and Peterson 2004; Molinero et al. 2006; Light and Lémonie  
24 2010), the focus of this article is on those who are non-elite participants but, nevertheless,  
25 continue during their teenage years.

26 Studies about young peoples' sports participation deal with youngsters in their early  
27 teens (see, for example, MacPhail et al. 2003; Light and Curry 2009; Light et al. 2011), but  
28 few have focused on sports participation by those in their mid- to late teens (15–19 years old)  
29 who are not elite sportspeople. By illuminating the experiences of non-elite participants, the  
30 overall aim is to study what makes teenagers continue to participate in club sports with a  
31 specific focus on what teenagers find meaningful and important when they participate in club  
32 sports. The results and their implications are discussed leading to suggestions for how club  
33 sports can be organized to make more teenagers participate longer. Instead of asking why  
34 teenagers drop out of sports, the focus is on why they participate. This is in line with the  
35 research questions that the sociologist Aaron Antonovsky posed and his salutogenic theory  
36 (Antonovsky 1979, 1987). Antonovsky's (1979, 1987) salutogenic theory and Sense of  
37 Coherence (SOC) model with the components of *comprehensibility*, *manageability*, and  
38 especially *meaningfulness* have served as analytic tools in the study.

### 39 **A salutogenic approach**

40 Instead of asking why people become ill, Antonovsky (1979) used a salutogenic  
41 approach and asked 'Why do they stay healthy?' (35). In other words, he concentrated on the  
42 resources for health rather than the risks of disease (Antonovsky 1979, 1987). Antonovsky's  
43 Sense of Coherence (SOC) model was developed to analyse what these health resources  
44 might consist of. He claimed that the ability to comprehend one's situation in life and the  
45 capacity to use resources explained why people in stressful situations managed to stay well  
46 and, in some cases, could even improve their health. In *Health, Stress and Coping*,  
47 Antonovsky (1979) defined SOC as:

48 ... a global orientation that expresses the extent to which one has a pervasive,  
49 enduring though dynamic feeling of confidence that one's internal and external

50 environments are predictable and that there is a high probability that things will work  
51 out as well as can reasonably be expected (184).

52 The SOC model consists of three components. The first one, comprehensibility, is the extent  
53 to which events are perceived as making logical sense, that they are ordered, consistent, and  
54 structured. Comprehensibility is experiencing life, the internal and external, as real, tangible,  
55 and structured rather than random and inexplicable. Antonovsky (1987) wrote that, 'The  
56 stimuli deriving from one's internal and external environments in the course of living are  
57 structured, predictable and explicable' (19). It is through experiences perceived as coherent  
58 and structured that comprehensibility is formed.

59 The second element, manageability, is the extent to which a person feels that he or she  
60 can cope. Manageability is 'the resources that are available to one to meet the demands posed  
61 by these stimuli' (Antonovsky 1987, 19), meaning that people feel that they have the  
62 resources to meet the demands made and the challenges set in the situation they are in.  
63 Resources can be artefacts such as physical tools and equipment, but they can also include  
64 social and cultural capital, such as social relations, matching skills in the form of motor skills,  
65 or mental and cognitive abilities. A good sense of manageability is shaped by a balance  
66 between the demands and the resources that the individual has access to.

67 Antonovsky's third element of SOC is meaningfulness: how much one feels that life  
68 makes sense and that challenges are worthy of commitment. If a person believes that there is  
69 no reason to persist, survive, and confront challenges, if he or she has no sense of meaning,  
70 then he or she will have no motivation to comprehend and manage events. Meaningfulness,  
71 which Antonovsky also calls the 'motivational component', is, in this sense, the most  
72 important component in the SOC context. Meaningfulness constitutes 'these demands' that  
73 'are challenges, worthy of investment and engagement' (Antonovsky 1987, 19). The term is  
74 about feeling a positive expectation of life and the future and indicates that situations in life

75 are challenging, interesting, and worthy of emotional commitment. Antonovsky stresses that  
76 SOC is not primarily concerned with the cognitive aspects but, rather, with the experience of  
77 being involved, engaged, and dedicated to situations in life (in sports in this study).

78 Antonovsky's main argument is that salutogenesis depends on experiencing a strong  
79 'sense of coherence'. Furthermore, human resources and the conditions of the living context  
80 result from the interaction between an individual and the structures of society (Antonovsky  
81 1979, 1987; Eriksson 2007). Antonovsky's salutogenic theory and the SOC model have been  
82 used in research on health and resilience in Sweden as well as in international research (see,  
83 for example, McCuaig and Hay 2012; Quennerstedt 2008; Eriksson 2007).

84 The fact that the study was inspired by Antonovsky means that I have taken the liberty  
85 of interpreting and utilizing his concept for the context of this study when posing the research  
86 question and analysing the interviews. The focus of this study is on matters related to young  
87 people's sense of coherence in sports participation. A starting point is the fact that, if young  
88 people consider their participation to be comprehensible (they understand the logic of sports),  
89 manageable (they can do what is required and they accept the conditions and rules), and  
90 meaningful (they want to be a part of it), it is more likely that they will participate longer.

## 91 **The study's format and methodology**

### 92 *Sample selection*

93 Purposeful sampling (Patton 2002) was used to select nine girls and nine boys  
94 between 15 and 19 years of age from eight different sports (athletics, basketball, equestrian  
95 sports, floorball, football, handball, swimming, and ultimate frisbee).<sup>ii</sup> The selection of sports  
96 and sports clubs was made using the Swedish Sports Confederation's database with its 69  
97 individual sports federations (Swedish Sports Confederation 2011b). A targeted sample  
98 selection was carried out to find young people who were not among the selected sports' elite.  
99 To obtain information-rich cases (Patton 2002), clubs were contacted, and their trainers

100 provided me with the names of teenagers who were suited to the research aim and questions.  
101 The teenagers were then contacted via e-mail and telephone.

### 102 *Collection of data*

103 In this study, a total of eighteen in-depth interviews were conducted. They were  
104 carried out in the spring of 2008 at places close to the teenagers' sports clubs. Each interview  
105 lasted between thirty and sixty minutes and was conducted as a private conversation to  
106 encourage the respondent to talk openly about his or her experiences and for the interviewer  
107 to ask follow-up questions (Kvale 1996; Creswell 2005). After obtaining their approval, all  
108 the interviews were recorded. An interview guide was used as an aid, and the questions were  
109 semi-structured. The purpose was to combine an exploration of a number of subject areas  
110 with a certain amount of freedom in the order and scope of the questions (Patton 2002). The  
111 interviews began with questions about how the teenagers would describe themselves.  
112 Thereafter, the questions focused on the teenagers' reasons for continuing with sports and the  
113 factors that made it easier or harder. All of the interviews were carried out in accordance with  
114 ethical guidelines (Kvale 1996).

### 115 *Transcription and analysis*

116 The purpose of a qualitative interview is usually considered in terms of trying to  
117 understand the world as indicated by the interview (Kvale 1996). The question is which world  
118 are we talking about. The method used and the questions posed raise theoretical questions  
119 about how a certain kind of reality is described when someone (the researcher) is asking  
120 someone else (the teenagers) to describe their participation in clubs sports. In light of what the  
121 young people talk about during the interview, it is possible to analyse what can be seen as  
122 being important for the teenagers in sports participation. Their opinions about their sports,  
123 their participation, what they have to manage and comprehend describe something about  
124 sports practice, which seems to be meaningful and of importance to continuing club sports. In

125 the analyses of the interviews, the salutogenic theory has been used as a theoretical  
126 framework. The SOC components, as described earlier in the article (see also Antonovsky  
127 1987), should be seen as analytic tools that are, ‘good to think with’. The SOC components  
128 are not separate elements but, rather, intertwined and related to the total situation of the  
129 respondents’ sports participation (see also Antonovsky 1979).

130         The analysis began with writing field notes immediately after the interviews, listening  
131 to the recordings, and then reading the transcripts word for word several times. During the  
132 listening and reading, notes were made in the text, especially regarding the question, ‘What  
133 does this statement say about participation in club sports?’ Once a whole transcript had been  
134 reviewed, the initial notes were transformed into concise phrases that captured the essence of  
135 what was reported. These phrases were listed so that the process of grouping them into themes  
136 could begin (Patton 2002).

137         In all the interviews, the young people said that they participated in sports because  
138 ‘doing sports is fun’. They described their sporting activities as fun and enjoyable, which  
139 seemed to be the reason why they were willing to spend time and energy continuing their  
140 sports. This is in line with the findings of previous studies (Wankel and Kreisel 1985;  
141 MacPhail et al. 2003; Trondman 2005; Light and Lémonie 2010; Light et al. 2011).

142         According to Côté and Hay (2002) and Franzén and Peterson (2004), young people drop out  
143 when they no longer experience sports as being fun, although drop out can of course also be  
144 resistant or reluctant dropouts (see for example Klint and Weiss 1986). Since my intention  
145 was to gain a deeper understanding of ‘what makes teenagers continue participate in sports’  
146 and the teenagers said, ‘It is fun’, I explored a corollary question, ‘What makes sports fun?’  
147 By using SOC’s analytic tools, several aspects of fun emerged that I consider to be closely  
148 related to meaningfulness, which contributes greatly to a sense of coherence in the lives of the  
149 teenage participants. More precisely, expressions associated with meaningfulness, such as

150 participation, involvement, enjoyment, solidarity, interest, motivation, and belief in the future,  
151 are utilized in the analysis (Antonovsky 1979, 1987; Hagström, Redemo and Larsson 2000;  
152 Cederblad and Hansson 1995). These expressions are also the foundation of the component of  
153 meaningfulness (Antonovsky 1987). In this article, I present the following meaningfulness-  
154 related themes that emerged in the analysis of the empirical data: *to experience, learn, and*  
155 *develop; to compete—the struggle is challenging; and enjoyment, involvement, and*  
156 *engagement with others.*

### 157 ***To experience, learn, and develop***

158         The interview began by asking the respondent to talk about himself or herself. Almost  
159 immediately, he or she talked about the fun and joy of engaging in sports. Anna said the  
160 following:

161             Int:           Please introduce yourself.

162             Ann:           Yes, my name is Anna. I'm 15 years old and I paint, draw, and  
163                           illustrate a lot during my free time.

164             Int:           Paint and draw?

165             Ann:           Mmhm, and also I really like dancing and playing frisbee. It's  
166                           really great fun.

167         When Anna was asked to specify what 'great fun' meant and the reasons that she both  
168 dances and plays ultimate frisbee, she said that she dances because she likes the challenge of  
169 learning and developing new moves, and she plays ultimate frisbee mainly to meet friends  
170 (this will be explained more in the third theme). Similar descriptions of what fun is and what  
171 gives meaning in doing sports were repeated in all the interviews. Participation in various  
172 sports seems to satisfy different needs, but not primarily to compete and train to become the  
173 best. Instead, club sports seem to bring joy, meaning, and opportunities for development and



174 learning. Patrik said, ‘You play football to have fun; it’s the whole point of football’. At the  
175 same time, it is about learning and developing something. I asked the following question:

176           Int:            Could you describe why you do sports?

177           Patrik:        To have fun. You always are dying to play football. . . . You kind  
178                           of want to develop and learn things.

179           The fun was explained in terms of ‘learning something completely new’, ‘coping with  
180 and successfully doing something you have practised for a long time’, ‘perfecting a particular  
181 move’, ‘increasing your understanding of the game or the logic of the specific sport’, and/or  
182 ‘learning to play and train with others’. Several of the teenagers did more than one sport  
183 because they wanted to learn new moves and develop different skills. Apparently,  
184 participating in one sport is not always enough. They were often involved in sports with  
185 various logics and practices, such as individual and team sports; goal sports with a ball, such  
186 as handball or football; and aesthetic sports involving music, such as different sorts of  
187 dancing. By participating in different sports, they were given opportunities to acquire various  
188 forms of physical, cognitive, and social development. Anna said, ‘It’s fun, you dance, you  
189 learn choreography’, while Erik, who plays handball, specified the fun and the  
190 meaningfulness in playing through developing to become a better player and increasing his  
191 understanding of the game:

192           Erik:            Developing, for me, is being able to understand the game; how it’s  
193                           set up for the opposing team’s attackers; being able to read it  
194                           quickly, efficiently;...and getting better individually. Being able to  
195                           shoot harder and being able to develop and understand the  
196                           formation and having a great understanding of the game and being  
197                           a part of the game. That’s meaningful and developing, for me.

198           The young people's descriptions reveal the importance of mastering technique,  
199   developing motor skills, being physically fit, and having the cognitive ability to understand  
200   what sports is about and to be able to do what is necessary. Having fun in a sports  
201   performance requires that the young people are resilient and have the patience to train, which,  
202   in turn, is a prerequisite for developing more complex motor skills. Understanding how and  
203   what one should practise and being able to do whatever is required are a part of  
204   comprehensibility and manageability and a necessity for a sense of meaningfulness and the  
205   SOC (Antonovsky 1987). Learning and development were described by interviewees as  
206   abilities that they should understand and cope with, often expressed in terms of feelings and  
207   experiences, such as 'the wonderful feeling when everything is right, correct, a feeling in your  
208   body'. Peter said:

209                   . . . once you get it to work, when you've practised, when everything works,  
210                   then you've achieved some kind of ultimate frisbee heaven, so to speak. When it  
211                   feels right, the exercise you've done over and over again.

212           The descriptions included examples, such as the fact that, when they had practised  
213   enough for the exercises or activities to have become automatic, they could enjoy, rather than  
214   merely perform, the body movements. They were described as pleasurable feelings that were  
215   experienced throughout the body, a sense of 'here and now' that was difficult to express in  
216   words because it is perceived by the body and is not primarily cognitive. It can be understood  
217   in terms of what Csikszentmihalyi (1975) called 'flow'. It is a feeling that makes the  
218   experience strong and something they do not want to be without. The SOC is embedded in the  
219   body experience and seems to be reinforced by physical activity and participating in sports  
220   with others during training and competition. Meaningfulness, in terms of learning and  
221   development, seems to be prominent and a very good reason for the investment of time and  
222   commitment. Similar results were found by Gonçalves, Carvalho and Light (2011).

223 *To compete—the struggle is challenging*

224 By training hard, the teenagers are disciplined in a specific competitive sporting  
225 activity. Club sports provide opportunities to structure one's life, which seems to be of great  
226 importance. The respondents often described that engaging in sports made them feel strong,  
227 both mentally and physically. However, there was little interest in working out on their own  
228 or in groups to simply keep in shape. Sara described non-competitive group training<sup>iii</sup> as  
229 follows:

230 Sara: But otherwise, Friskis and Svettis [group fitness training] is a good  
231 option. I've not . . . I've not given it a try, but it looks really  
232 boring.

233 Int: Oh . . . why?

234 Sara: Well, I don't know . . . it feels so pointless when you, well, cos I  
235 love to compete, so I've noticed when I've improved. It feels like  
236 when you go there [Friskis and Svettis], you run back and forth a  
237 bit and so you don't get anything out of it. . . .

238 'Getting something out of it' is the same as having a goal to train for, which may  
239 require competing and playing matches. Just working out or physical training for its own sake  
240 or the sake of fitness does not play a prominent role for Sara. She needs challenges,  
241 excitement, and the struggle of the moment, which she gets when she competes in athletics.  
242 Training alone or training to invest in increased physical fitness did not seem to appeal to the  
243 teenagers. Instead, training was linked to personal and team improvement. Lisa gave the  
244 following answer as to why she trains at a club instead of on her own:

245 Lisa: No, but, to train . . . (laughs), to feel good, you've got to do some  
246 cos . . . physical activity . . .

247 Int: Mm.

248 Lisa: And . . . so just going to the gym or running, you get a lot out of it,  
249 too, but it's so much more fun to do it for a goal.

250 Int: Mm.

251 Lisa And together with others.

252 Int: Mm.

253 Lisa; To, yes, compete and it . . . it's a totally different thing if you're in  
254 a club.

255 Tournaments and match situations are predicated on the logic that one must compete  
256 to beat others. One of the teenagers highlighted this as important and meaningful, while others  
257 described their own or their teams' task-oriented performance as important. The focus is on  
258 the struggle of the moment. It is not primarily the competition and the match with its logic of  
259 ranking, winning, and losing that the teenagers find meaningful even though they are all  
260 educated in these principles. Instead, meaningfulness and fun are experienced in terms of the  
261 challenge in the actual struggle itself. The excitement is to have a goal to look forward to,  
262 where one can test oneself together with others. Lotta described it as follows:

263 Lotta: It's to see how far you can push yourself, how fast you can run,  
264 how far you can jump, and so on.

265 The challenge has to be on 'equal' terms. For Lotta in this study it is not enjoyable if the  
266 games are too one-sided. Lotta continued:

267 In floorball, it's the case that our best result is when we won ten-  
268 nil, but perhaps it was cos the other team was rubbish, not cos we  
269 were good.

270 The challenge is not primarily to compete to win even if it is the dominant practice in  
271 club sports, but more the challenge itself as a game (see Engström 2008). Patrik believes that

272 to continue participating in a sport where the main goal is winning, one must understand and  
273 be capable of playing the sport:

274           Patrik:       Sometimes, you're shattered and you don't want to go . . . but then  
275                           . . . if you don't go and practise and train, then they won't let you  
276                           play matches. And you want to play matches, so that's why you go  
277                           anyway. . . . Something where you've got to fight, where you've  
278                           got to make an effort, you must fight but not just win, so here . . .  
279                           you will have to fight to win, but, at the same time, it's not "the  
280                           winning" that is important.

281           The competition is both motivating and enjoyable, but the emphasis is more on the  
282 challenge than becoming the winner. Young people described the competition and games as a  
283 motivating factor in developing their own sporting ability and a common goal to unite the  
284 team or training groups. However, they do not have sporting ambitions that are defined by  
285 success in elite sports.

286           The teenagers often return to the importance of knowing that they have mastered the  
287 sports and competition. As they grow older, greater demands are placed on them in terms of  
288 having sufficient physical and mental skills to handle competitive elements. The competition  
289 is a part of the sport's logic that is emphasized to a greater extent after the age of 12 (Côté and  
290 Hay 2002; Swedish Sports Confederation 2011a). Even though most of the teenagers said that  
291 it is fun and meaningful to compete, not all of them appreciate it. For Lotta, who was quoted  
292 earlier, it is meaningful to participate in club sports to improve and be a part of a training  
293 group, but she prefers not to compete. The actual racing is not meaningful or motivating, but  
294 she realizes that she must do it to be able to continue at the sports club.

295           Lotta:       For me, competing is not important, but I got to compete. Sure, it's  
296                           nice to see if you've improved and so, but it's still this . . . you still

297                    have to compete to be in the club, if you say. . . . You still have to  
298                    compete to remain . . . to be able to still be a part of their [the  
299                    club's] activities.

300                    The dominating practices in club sports, which are usually implicit, seem to require  
301                    the teenager to compete and specialize if he or she wants to continue in the training group.  
302                    Young people must, therefore, understand that the purpose is to compete, be able to handle  
303                    competitive situations, and be willing to be a part of the contest.

304                    ***Enjoyment, involvement, and engagement with others***

305                    In the interviews, the last theme to emerge regarding what is perceived as fun and  
306                    meaningful in club sports is sharing experiences with others. All the young people returned to  
307                    the enjoyment of having training peers and the importance of feeling solidarity with both  
308                    participants and coaches. Other studies have shown similar results (Wankel and Kreisel 1985;  
309                    Coakley and White 1992; MacPhail et al. 2003; Allander et al. 2006). A common reason for  
310                    dropping out of sports, particularly among those of younger ages, is because friends do (Côté  
311                    and Hay 2002; Franzén and Peterson 2004). All the respondents said they began to play sports  
312                    because their classmates and friends had started at a club, but they had continued despite the  
313                    fact that their friends had stopped. Emma explained that she took up her current sport because  
314                    she wanted to make new friends and get into the class's 'girl gang':

315                    Emma:            I was ten years old, so uh, so I started with basketball cos it was a  
316                    way to make more friends.

317                    Int:              Mm.

318                    Emma:            And, uh, I was not so close to the girls in my class.

319                    Int.                Nah.

320                    Emma:            Cos I was more like a tomboy.

321                    Int:                Okay.

322 Emma: But it was a way to, uh, make more contact with the girls in the  
323 class.

324 For Emma, participating in sports became her ticket to fellowship. Later in the interview, she  
325 said, 'You learn to socialize through sports'. She described it as 'sisterhood', a communion  
326 with the girls in the team. She gave the example of a situation where the team was, at one  
327 moment, training very seriously and hard, and the next, they were laughing and joking  
328 together. Sisterhood came as a result of the players' doing something together that involved  
329 the entire body and the fact that the training was a mixture of laughter and seriousness. Emma  
330 said that it differs from other forms of leisure-time social interaction where one hangs out or  
331 is at home with someone or in a virtual meeting place on the Web. The variation between  
332 having a specific task to solve, the game and the workout, combined with being able to switch  
333 between 'seriousness' and 'light-heartedness' and sharing it with others, makes sports a  
334 special phenomenon, which is perceived as the fun and meaningfulness of sports.

335 Several of the interviewees emphasized that training peers and coaches were the ones  
336 who motivated them to go to practice when life felt frustrating, both because it was fun to  
337 meet peers and because it was expected that everyone should participate. In some of the  
338 interviews, it was evident that team spirit had sometimes been overshadowed by competition  
339 and individuality, and this had led to several of the respondents' giving up a sport and either  
340 going to a new club for the same sport or taking up a different sport. Ellen stopped doing  
341 gymnastics when she felt that the club's activities had become increasingly competitive. The  
342 rivalry intensified in both the club and against other clubs, with emphasized and increased  
343 competition, combined with increasingly hard and unbalanced exercise programmes. The  
344 following question was asked:

345 Int: Can you explain why you are now playing floorball?

346 Ellen: Gymnastics was a little more stressful and I thought I would do  
347 something more social and, in that case, it became floorball.  
348 Gymnastics isn't so much "we".

349 For Ellen, meaningfulness decreased as competition became more intense. Several of the  
350 young people described similar situations. Asked why he had not continued with judo, Peter  
351 answered as follows:

352 Peter: In judo, it was the case that I was treated as a bit of an outcast by  
353 the group. They were the ones who competed and the ones the club  
354 focused on. They looked down on those who had lower belts. So,  
355 in the end, I couldn't stand it any longer cos I saw no point in  
356 having a particular coloured belt. I was just there to have fun.

357 Peter quit because he did not value the ranking, although he understood the purpose of  
358 ranking system shown by coloured belts, he did not appreciate its effects. Furthermore, he  
359 could not bear the harassment in the training group.

360 Despite encountering difficulties within some sports clubs, sports seemed to be very  
361 important, meaningful, and appealing to the respondents. Therefore, they looked for either a  
362 new club or a different sport to continue. When Ellen, who was quoted earlier, was asked why  
363 she continued with floorball, she gave the following answer:

364 Ellen: It's fun and so . . . you feel good working out and then you've  
365 something to fight for and meeting friends, and so you're not  
366 passive. Cos when you don't train, you then become pretty lazy.

367 Int: But you could meet friends in the café or sing in a choir or  
368 something like that? Why sports?

369 Ellen: Oh . . . then you've something to do and you don't have to talk . . .  
370 like, you hang out [together] anyway.



371 For Ellen, the solution was to find a new sport to experience fellowship and joy with  
372 others, one that she could do and quickly understand how to play. The teenagers find club  
373 sports activities sufficiently appealing and meaningful to continue in a new sport when they  
374 give up another. They also have enough sporting skills so they can understand and try a new  
375 sport. Sports give an opportunity to socialize and feel a team spirit without needing to talk, as  
376 Ellen expressed in the above quote. The participants are physically close and do exercises  
377 during the same training session. Here, there is closeness without the need for everything to  
378 be expressed or discussed in words.

379 All the interviewees felt that the team and/or the training group were an important  
380 reason, and for some, the most important factor in continuing. At the same time, they  
381 indicated that they would continue to play sports even if their clubs closed down or their  
382 coaches left because they believed they could acquire new sporting peers and playing sports  
383 was too important to them to quit. Some saw not having time for their non-sporty friends as a  
384 problem that generally made their lives less manageable. Being unable to spend time with  
385 friends or saying no to other activities was perceived as stressful sometimes. Sporting peers  
386 and coaches were regarded as sources of social pressure because, even though it felt hard  
387 sometimes, they went to practice anyway, mainly because they wanted to experience the team  
388 spirit, be loyal, and not let their coaches or teammates down.

389 What was perceived as meaningful and of importance for the teenagers was the ability  
390 to learn sporting skills, experience development, challenges, and social intercourse through  
391 mutual tasks. Club sports participation seemed to be an arena where they experienced a sense  
392 of coherence.

### 393 **Discussion**

394 The overall aim of this interview study was to investigate ‘what makes teenagers  
395 participate’ with a specific focus on what teenagers find meaningful and important when they

396 participate in club sports. The discussion of the results is mainly inspired by Antonovsky's  
397 salutogenic framework where the SOC components serve as 'analytic tools' for the  
398 interpretation of the interviews to provide a deeper understanding of teenagers' participation  
399 in club sports. These aspects will now be discussed in terms of suggestions for how to  
400 organize club sports to make them attractive to people in their late teens. The latter is  
401 particularly noteworthy in light of recent efforts by Western societies to increase physical  
402 activity among children and adolescents (Malina 2001; WHO 2002; Kirk 2005; SOU  
403 2008:59).

404         It became apparent that the study presented in this article concerns a specific group of  
405 teenagers, namely young people who trained and competed in one or more sports several days  
406 a week. A large part of the activity involved contests and competition. They all started at an  
407 early age, often encouraged by their parents. This meant they had been doing club sports for  
408 more than half their lives, and they have all tried different kinds of sports in various sports  
409 clubs. Club sports can, thus, be said to constitute a very large proportion of the young  
410 people's lives, and they seem to have a strong predilection for performance and competitive  
411 club sports (see, for example, Trondman 2005; Larsson 2008; Thedin Jakobsson et al. 2012).

412         In the salutogenic-inspired analysis of the teenagers' descriptions of their participation  
413 as being fun and enjoyable, the meaningfulness emerges, first and foremost, in terms of  
414 learning and development. Moreover, they also feel the sport itself provides structure to their  
415 lives and gives them a meaningful and enjoyable context at that moment. This is something  
416 that they do not want to be without. Winning and striving for competitive success were not  
417 aspects that the teenagers stressed. They take part in sport within elite contexts but do not  
418 appear to have elite ambitions for the sport about which they were interviewed. This is in  
419 some way surprising given the teenagers' ages and heavy involvement in club sports.  
420 According to Côte and Hay (2002) one would have expected them to be more ambitious to

421 become the best (see also Kirk 2005). One interpretation is that there are few opportunities at  
422 this age to do club sports that are not elite-focused. Another interpretation is that they are very  
423 competent young people who can cope with hard training and competition alongside lots of  
424 schoolwork. One might have thought that they took up sports to become top sports  
425 participants, but instead, they seek sufficiently difficult challenges where they can learn and  
426 develop. Competition is something that they have to cope with and that provides a challenge.  
427 Success in competition is like confirmation of development. Those who remain in sports have  
428 developed skills to master and find it natural to engage in an activity that includes  
429 competition, even if they themselves often emphasize the importance of social interaction and  
430 the development of abilities. Gonçalves et al. (2011) reached similar findings in a  
431 retrospective study of female athletes.

432 All the teenagers have other friends outside sports, but they appreciate the very special  
433 experience of sharing sporting activities with a common goal that contributes to a sense of  
434 coherence. Although all have stopped doing one sport, they have continued with another since  
435 the meaningfulness of continuing has been strong enough and they are also sufficiently  
436 athletically skilled to join a new club or take up a different sport. In other words, they can  
437 manage and have special resources that Antonovsky (1979, 1987) includes in what he called  
438 General Resistance Resources (GRR).

439 The results in this study indicate that young people seem unlikely to continue with a  
440 sport, enjoy it, and feel its meaningfulness if they do not start early and are willing to practice  
441 and compete frequently. Competitive sports at a senior level seem to be the prevailing logic of  
442 sports for teenagers. One interpretation of the teenagers' statements is that a prerequisite for  
443 enjoying and having a sense of meaningfulness in club sports is that one is raised within a  
444 club sports environment and can handle an elite-oriented practice even if one does not have  
445 elite ambitions. Those young people who do not have these dimensions are, if not

446 automatically excluded, either choosing exclusion or being excluded from long-term  
447 engagement with sports (see, for example, Collins 2012; Macdonald et al. 2012; Thedin  
448 Jakobsson et al. 2012). The results indicate that club sports seem to include teenagers who  
449 appreciate and can handle and understand competitive elite-level sports (see also, for  
450 example, Green 2006; Fraser-Thomas et al. 2008). Continuing with club sports at an  
451 intermediate and recreational level without competitive challenges does not seem possible,  
452 and maybe that is why so few take up sports and why so many drop out in their teens.

453         The conclusion is that doing sports seems to be manageable for and comprehensible  
454 and meaningful to the teenagers in this study but what is meaningful seems to differ in some  
455 aspects. Antonovsky's concepts were, in this case, useful in investigating club sports  
456 participation with the analysis question, 'What makes sports fun?' It seems as if doing sports  
457 is a social space where the teenagers can experience meaningfulness based on learning,  
458 developing physical ability, experiencing a feeling of belonging, and being challenged. In this  
459 way, club sports fill an important function in young people's lives by making it possible for  
460 them to have a sporting lifestyle and a sense of coherence in sporting activities. The teenagers  
461 have been active members of sports clubs for many years of their relatively short lives. They  
462 do not know what a life without sports is. Such a life seems, if not meaningless, at least less  
463 meaningful.

464         Previous studies have suggested that children's sports (ages 6-12) should involve  
465 increasing deliberate play and emphasize development, fun, and enjoyment (Côté and Hay  
466 2002; Sidentop 2002; Côté, Coakley and Bruner 2012). Is this something that should be  
467 emphasised also for teenagers to encourage more of them to continue longer? The teenagers  
468 in this study participate and appreciate sports, especially for the opportunity of learning and  
469 developing together with others. I believe this suggests that sports clubs should try to organize  
470 activities emphasizing development with numerous opportunities and challenges for motor

471 and social learning, instead of competitions as the only focal point. Furthermore it is  
472 conceivable that club sports as well as physical education could make use of a salutogenic  
473 approach where learning processes are the focus (see also Quennerstedt 2008).

474         If the findings correspond with young people's willingness to learn and develop, it is  
475 important for both sports clubs and schools to be attentive to all pupils regardless of age and  
476 ambitions, to give them opportunities to learn physical activities and motor skills, and to  
477 become physically competent. A wise and well-conducted sport practise can create resources  
478 that underpin both the manageability and comprehensibility in order to increase the  
479 opportunities to participate in physical activity and sport. By employing an approach in which  
480 questions are asked about what teenagers need to understand, manage, and experience as  
481 meaningful in sports, more young people can be given opportunities to become involved and,  
482 it is hoped, to participate longer. One way could also be to ask the teenagers how they want to  
483 elaborate their own sports practice.

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<sup>i</sup> The Swedish Sports Confederation (RF) is the country's largest popular and non-profit movement with around 22,000 sports clubs and 600,000 voluntary leaders with many teenage participants ([www.rf.se](http://www.rf.se)). Although the Confederation is an independent non-governmental organisation, it is dependent on public financial support. It has been a part of the development of the welfare state and Swedish welfare policy since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Bergsgard and Norberg 2010). Today, the sport movement's role is emphasised as an important factor that benefits democracy, equality, and public health (SOU 2008:59). One of the core values in the policy document of RF is *enjoyment and community* (Swedish Sports Confederation 2011a).

<sup>ii</sup> Statistics of participation in different sports federations were used to select sports to obtain a variation in the number of clubs and participants in each sport, such as most participants aged between 7 and 12 (football, equestrian sports, and swimming); most participants aged between 13 and 16 (athletics, basketball, floorball, and handball); and most participants aged between 17 and 20 (ultimate frisbee).

<sup>iii</sup> Group fitness classes based on Ling gymnastics.