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### **Abstract**

A common practice in sport is to *play-up* youth athletes who are highly skilled against chronologically older peers. However, the potential effects of playing-up on youth's athletic and personal development have not been explored. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate athletes' perceptions of how playing-up may have influenced their sport-specific skill and psychosocial development. Seventeen athletes from four soccer clubs in Ontario, Canada, participated in semi-structured interviews where they described their playing-up experiences. An inductive thematic analysis was performed to capture athletes' perceptions of playing-up and the ways in which it may have affected their development. Results showed that athletes perceived playing-up to involve a balance between two high-order themes: (a) challenge and (b) progress. Regarding challenge, athletes struggled most to cope with the intensity of practices and games and to fit in socially with older peers. Regarding progress, athletes felt most rewarded when they received recognition for their talent, experienced success, and had opportunities to develop expertise. Athletes also commented that their teammates and coaches played a pivotal role in facilitating their sport-specific skill and psychosocial development. Practical applications for sport practitioners are proposed and avenues for further research are identified.

*Keywords:* youth sport, soccer coaching, accelerated learning

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### **Lay Summary**

This study explored athletes' perceptions of playing-up at higher age levels. Playing-up was challenging because it required athletes to cope with high-intensity competition and fit in with older peers. Playing-up was also rewarding for athletes who received recognition for their skill, succeeded against older peers, and developed expertise.

### **Implications for Practice**

- Athletes were more likely to integrate socially within an older team when teammates introduced themselves and included them in sport and social activities.
- Constructive feedback from coaches that included clear strategies for improvement facilitated mutual trust and respect with athletes who played-up.
- Athletes who had opportunities to demonstrate their skill and share tactical knowledge with teammates perceived less challenge in proving themselves within an older team.

## 47 Athlete Perceptions of Playing-Up in Youth Soccer

48 Research has explored various factors that affect youth athletes' engagement in sport,  
49 including personal (e.g., the accumulation of practice and play; Ford et al., 2009), relational (e.g.,  
50 the dynamics of coach-athlete relationships; Vella et al., 2013), and contextual variables (e.g.,  
51 the birthplace and relative age effects; Baker et al., 2009; Cobley et al., 2009). However, past  
52 studies have mainly focused on how engagement is affected when athletes participate with same-  
53 aged peers. There remains a need to explore factors that may affect athletes' sport experiences  
54 when they participate outside of their chronological age groups. For example, when athletes  
55 show that they are more skilled than their same-aged peers, they may be encouraged or allowed  
56 to compete at higher age levels. This phenomenon is commonly known as *playing-up*. It is  
57 understood that playing-up occurs in sport programs because there are policies in place to help  
58 athletes move between age groups. Such policies are used, for example, to invite highly-skilled  
59 athletes from lower age groups to play-up on older teams that lack full rosters of players (Malina  
60 et al., 2019). It is also common for coaches to invite athletes to play-up if they are more  
61 physically mature than their same-aged peers. Coaches may group physically mature athletes  
62 with older peers to facilitate skill development and prevent them from relying on their physical  
63 attributes in order to succeed (Cumming et al., 2018).

64 There is a popular belief that athletes may improve performance as a result of playing-up  
65 (e.g., O'Sullivan, 2017). For instance, parents may see benefits in playing-up when their children  
66 are technically advanced compared to their same-age peers, as playing-up exposes them to a  
67 sport environment that is more appropriately competitive. However, Campbell and colleagues  
68 (2018) suggest that playing-up may not be enjoyable for athletes who like playing with same-  
69 aged friends or who dislike competitive play. Accordingly, Reeves and colleagues (2018)

70 proposed a hybrid model whereby athletes switch between bio-banded, ability-based, and  
71 psycho-banded groups. This model enables athletes to participate with their friends in addition to  
72 competing and forming new relationships with players in other groups (see also Hill et al., 2020).  
73 These suggestions are especially relevant in light of current trends toward early sport  
74 specialization (Erdal, 2018). As an example, if coaches of athletes who play-up prioritize their  
75 performance over personal development and continued participation, athletes may be more likely  
76 to experience injury or burnout (Myer et al., 2016). These findings, while limited, demonstrate  
77 that playing-up may have important implications for athletes' continued engagement in a sport.

78 To study how playing-up may affect the youth sport experience, it is necessary to  
79 understand how youth develop through sport generally. One framework that outlines youth's  
80 development in sport is the Personal Assets Framework (PAF; Côté et al., 2014; Vierimaa et al.,  
81 2017). The PAF proposes that three dynamic elements affect athlete development: personal  
82 engagement in activities, quality social dynamics, and appropriate settings. When the dynamic  
83 elements contribute to immediately enjoyable sport experiences, they may affect athletes'  
84 personal assets such as competence, confidence, connection, and character. If improvements in  
85 the personal assets are sustained over time, athletes may increase performance, participation, and  
86 personal development. In the context of the PAF, playing-up may affect youth's sport  
87 experiences by contributing to changes in athletes' personal assets. The PAF emphasizes the  
88 need to explore how playing-up may influence athletes' sport-specific skill and psychosocial  
89 development.

90 Previous studies have not explored how playing-up may contribute to athletes' sport-  
91 specific skill and psychosocial outcomes. However, if playing-up is conceptualized as a method  
92 of grouping athletes based on skill level, there is a growing body of research on how other forms

93 of grouping may affect athlete outcomes. Current literature has mainly focused on the effects of  
94 grouping athletes according to chronological age and maturity (e.g., Cobley et al., 2009;  
95 Cumming et al., 2017).

96 In youth sport, athletes are commonly grouped according to chronological age to generate  
97 equity across competition. However, when practitioners create age groups using a cut-off date,  
98 athletes who are born just after the cut-off date end up being older than most of their peers. In  
99 addition, athletes in the same age group can vary in biological age by as much as five to six years  
100 (Johnson, 2018). Past research shows that when coaches assume that athletes' physiological  
101 characteristics correspond to their ability, older and early maturing athletes in a given age group  
102 may experience performance advantages (Cobley et al., 2009; Johnson et al., 2017). These  
103 advantages have been shown to be particularly relevant in youth soccer, whereby relatively older  
104 and early maturing athletes are consistently overrepresented in talent development programs  
105 (Cumming et al., 2017; Kelly & Williams, 2020). Researchers have also connected relative age  
106 and maturation effects to outcomes such as dropout, which reflects athletes' motivation to  
107 participate in sport (Dixon et al., 2011). Moreover, researchers have observed connections  
108 between relatively later birthdates and dropout internationally and across sports (e.g., Helsen et  
109 al., 1998; Lemez et al., 2013). It has been suggested that relatively younger and late maturing  
110 athletes may be more likely to drop out when parents and coaches expect little of them, and as a  
111 result, athletes develop low self-expectations for success (Hancock et al., 2013). This evidence  
112 suggests that grouping athletes into age categories may hinder the sport-specific skill and  
113 psychosocial development of relatively younger and late maturing individuals within an age  
114 group.

115 Organizations such as football academies are structuring athlete groups according to  
116 maturity as well as chronological age to mitigate growth and maturation bias (MacDonald et al.,  
117 2009). One such example is bio-banding, which describes the grouping of athletes based on a  
118 combination of age, anthropometric measures, and maturation indicators (Cumming et al., 2017).  
119 Bio-banding is similar to playing-up because in both cases, athletes participate in mixed age  
120 groups. However, there is greater variance in maturity when athletes play-up compared to when  
121 they are bio-banded, which may increase the focus on physicality over sport-specific skill during  
122 games.

123 Bio-banding may offer an advantage by reducing inequalities in maturation between  
124 athletes in the same age category, and thus promoting more equal competition (Webdale et al.,  
125 2019). In a recent study, English soccer academies participated in tournaments where coaches  
126 used bio-banding to make teams (Cumming et al., 2018). Athletes who participated in these  
127 tournaments engaged in focus groups whereby they discussed their experiences with bio-  
128 banding. Overall, athletes with large body types perceived that their games were more physically  
129 challenging, while athletes with small body types reported less of a physical challenge, but found  
130 it easier to make an impact in games. Despite these perceived benefits for athletes' sport-specific  
131 skill, in a different study, it was found that bio-banding had a potentially negative influence on  
132 athletes' psychosocial development. Campbell and colleagues (2018) showed that youth rugby  
133 players in New Zealand were 46 percent more likely to drop out when they were bio-banded into  
134 an older age group. The authors suggested that an aggressive style of play or the inability to  
135 participate with same-aged friends potentially contributed to dropout. However, it was found that  
136 athletes with small body types who were bio-banded were actually less likely to drop out relative  
137 to the norm. While Campbell and colleagues (2018) did not comment on why they observed this

138 effect, athletes with small body types may have been less likely to drop out because they  
139 perceived greater feelings of leadership in bio-banded games (Bradley et al., 2019). Since bio-  
140 banding impacted athletes with small body types more than those with large body types, the  
141 overall policy appeared to be beneficial, which limited the authors' findings. Nonetheless, these  
142 findings emphasize that in order for bio-banding to facilitate positive experiences, the sport  
143 environment must be manipulated to suit athletes' needs. Therefore, it is necessary to examine  
144 the needs of athletes who compete outside their age level and develop strategies for practitioners  
145 to support them.

146         Current evidence, while limited, demonstrates that athlete grouping may influence  
147 individuals' sport-specific skill and psychosocial development. Due to the lack of research in  
148 sport, it may be helpful to gain a deeper understanding of how issues that are similar to playing-  
149 up have been studied within education. For instance, in the same way that coaches may play-up  
150 athletes who are more mature or who show advanced sport-specific skill relative to their same-  
151 aged peers, teachers may group high-achieving students with older peers who are similarly high-  
152 achieving to provide developmentally appropriate learning experiences (e.g., Gentry & Owen,  
153 1999; Hill et al., 2020; Sayler & Brookshire, 1993; Vygotsky, 1978). A common example of this  
154 phenomenon is *acceleration*, whereby students enter into school early or skip a grade  
155 (Steenbergen-Hu et al., 2016).

156         Previous research on the impact of acceleration on students' academic achievement and  
157 psychosocial development has shown promising results. As an example, meta-analytic findings  
158 from Kulik and Kulik (1982) showed that across 26 studies, high-achieving students who were  
159 accelerated exhibited greater academic achievement than their same-aged peers and similar  
160 achievement compared to their older peers (see also Steenbergen-Hu & Moon, 2011). With





184 researchers' methodological approach was grounded in constructivism and followed relativist  
185 ontology and subjectivist epistemology. According to relativism, reality is subjective, and people  
186 experience reality differently based on the context in which it is created (Ormston et al., 2014).  
187 To learn about reality, a subjectivist perspective suggests that one must explore how people  
188 understand and perceive their social world (Willis et al., 2007). Through the lenses of relativist  
189 ontology and subjectivist epistemology, the role of the researcher is to work together with  
190 participants to help them understand their subjective realities. The researcher must then interpret  
191 the participants' perceptions and communicate how they think and feel about their experiences.

192         In the current study, the first author used semi-structured interviews to learn how athletes  
193 perceived their playing-up experiences and how they may have affected their sport-specific skill  
194 and psychosocial development. The semi-structured dynamic of the interviews gave athletes the  
195 freedom to discuss the issues that were most relevant to them (Yeo et al., 2014). At appropriate  
196 times during the interviews, the first author encouraged athletes to tell stories to describe key  
197 moments in their playing-up experiences (e.g., the decision to play-up). Athletes who narrated  
198 their experiences provided the first author with stories that spoke to their development over time.

### 199 *Positionality*

200         Bourke (2014) notes that researchers co-create knowledge with participants in different  
201 ways based on their positionality relative to the research questions. As such, the first author's  
202 approach to understanding athletes' perceptions of playing-up may have been affected by his  
203 background as a recreational soccer player, coach, and referee. At the time of data collection, the  
204 first author accumulated 20 years of experience playing recreational soccer. He had also worked  
205 for four years as a youth soccer coach, and for six years as a referee in adult soccer leagues.  
206 These experiences equipped the first author with an intimate understanding of the culture and

207 norms embedded within youth soccer. Overall, the first author's unique positionality within  
208 soccer helped him to access a variety of interested participants for the study and engage them in  
209 deep conversations about their playing-up experiences.

## 210 **Participants**

211       Following institutional ethics approval, the first author used purposeful sampling to  
212 recruit 17 participants aged 13-17 years ( $M_{\text{age}} = 15.2 \pm 1.3$  years). Initially, the first author  
213 emailed the parents of 34 athletes who played-up to invite them to participate in the study.  
214 Parents of 21 athletes responded to his email to express their child's interest in completing an  
215 interview. Out of 21 athletes, two athletes participated in pilot interviews and 17 others  
216 participated in interviews that were transcribed for thematic analysis. The remaining two athletes  
217 did not participate in interviews because of logistical reasons (e.g., the first author moved to a  
218 different city and could not meet them in person).

219       The 17 participants were soccer players who played-up within one of four soccer clubs in  
220 Ontario, Canada. There were five female participants aged 13-16 years ( $M_{\text{age}} = 14.4 \pm 1.1$  years),  
221 and twelve male participants aged 13-17 years ( $M_{\text{age}} = 15.5 \pm 1.3$  years). Participants had  
222 accumulated 1-8 years of experience playing-up ( $M_{\text{experience}} = 2.7 \pm 1.8$  years). All of the  
223 participants played-up by one year, except for one participant who played-up by two years. In  
224 addition, two participants played-up but returned to same-aged play prior to data collection.  
225 Specific demographic information related to the participants' racial and ethnic background was  
226 not collected, however, all of the participants were Canadian and Caucasian.

227       Across all participants, eight players shared one coach, two players shared a second  
228 coach, and the remaining seven players all had different coaches. Due to the focus of the study

229 on players' experiences of playing-up, the researchers proceeded with this sample as the players  
230 were all in a position to provide rich accounts of their playing-up experiences.

### 231 **Data Collection**

#### 232 *Interview Guide and Reflexive Journal*

233         The first author assembled an interview guide with other members of the research team to  
234 ensure that the interviews yielded rich data that were relevant to the research questions. The  
235 complete interview guide is available in the Appendix. The questions included in the interview  
236 guide were informed by the PAF (Côté et al., 2014; Vierimaa et al., 2017), whereby they  
237 encouraged athletes to discuss the activities, social dynamics, and settings involved in playing-  
238 up. After conducting two pilot interviews, the first author added three probes to the interview  
239 guide. These probes prompted discussion about athletes' background information (i.e., "For how  
240 many years have you played up?") as well as the roles of teammates (i.e., "What advice would  
241 you give to teammates of athletes who play-up?") and coaches (i.e., "What advice would you  
242 give to coaches of athletes who play-up?") in supporting athletes' playing-up experiences. The  
243 first author asked additional probing questions when athletes' responses to previous questions  
244 lacked depth. These additional probing questions varied across athletes, but in general, they  
245 encouraged athletes to describe anecdotes and tell stories about their experiences (e.g., "if I  
246 watched one of your games, what would I see?"; "Tell me a story about when you tried out for  
247 an older team."). The first author used this approach to facilitate athletes' introspective  
248 capacities.

249         The first author conducted and audio-recorded 17 interviews as part of the data collection  
250 process. The interviews were conducted in the last three months of the outdoor soccer season so  
251 that athletes could reflect on their experiences over the course of the season. The average

252 interview length was 56:32. Later, the first author transcribed the interviews verbatim using  
253 ExpressScribe transcription software. He maintained confidentiality by assigning a participant  
254 number to each athlete using a random number generator.

255 To supplement the interview transcripts, the first author kept a reflexive journal in which  
256 he clarified his assumptions relative to the data. He began the journaling process by writing out  
257 his philosophy on playing-up. During each interview, he took notes on athletes' body language,  
258 tone, and the ease or difficulty with which they responded to questions. When each interview  
259 was complete, he documented his reactions and the athletes' key messages in an audio recording.  
260 He assembled a reflexive journal by synthesizing data from his notes and audio recordings.

## 261 **Data Analysis**

262 After all the interviews were transcribed, the first author performed inductive thematic  
263 analysis of the transcripts. Inductive analysis provided data-driven results that addressed the  
264 topics that were most important to the participants (Braun et al., 2017).

265 The first author conducted thematic analysis using Quirkos software and completed a six-  
266 step process as outlined by Braun and colleagues (2017). First, he read over the interview  
267 transcripts until he was familiar with the data. He also began assembly of his reflexive journal at  
268 this stage. Second, he identified meaningful units (MUs) of information in each transcript and  
269 assigned one or more codes to each MU. Third, he sorted codes into low-order themes. He  
270 organized the low-order themes in a separate document and added commentary and supporting  
271 quotations. He then edited participants' supporting quotations to make them easier to read.  
272 Fourth, he grouped the low-order themes together into high-order themes. He built a skeleton for  
273 his results once he finalized the high-order themes. Fifth, he defined and named the high-order  
274 themes. Finally, he integrated the analytic writing into a final report.

**275 Methodological Rigor**

276           The research team employed a study design that followed effective qualitative research  
277 practices. Tracy (2010) reviewed indicators of “excellent qualitative research” and proposed  
278 eight criteria through which to assess rigor. In accordance with relativist ontology and  
279 subjectivist epistemology, the research team selected a subset of these criteria to highlight the  
280 unique aspects of the current study (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). The criteria of *worthy topic*,  
281 *significant contribution*, *sincerity*, *meaningful coherence*, and *credibility* contributed to rigor in  
282 this study.

283           This study covered a *worthy topic*, as playing-up has received limited attention in  
284 previous literature, and Canada Soccer explicitly requested that this research be undertaken.  
285 Canada Soccer did not fund this study, but its representatives identified playing-up as a topic of  
286 research interest, and they gave feedback on the study design and written manuscript. In  
287 addition, this study advanced knowledge of how playing-up may have affected athletes’ sport-  
288 specific skill and psychosocial development. This knowledge could spark future research on skill  
289 acquisition in youth and may inform changes to sport policy that target improved athlete  
290 outcomes. Collectively, the theoretical and practical implications of this study indicate that it  
291 *significantly contributes* to current literature.

292           The first author also demonstrated *sincerity* by using a reflexive journal to recognize his  
293 biases relative to the data. He referred to the reflexive journal throughout the data analysis phase  
294 to question and dispel personal reactions to athletes’ perceived experiences. This process aided in  
295 reporting athletes’ perceptions of playing-up with minimal bias.

296           From a different perspective, the research team established an interview guide in a way  
297 that demonstrated *meaningful coherence*. The first author collaborated with other members of the

298 research team to develop a list of interview questions that yielded rich and relevant data. In  
299 addition, he conducted pilot tests to identify probes that facilitated athletes' critical thinking.

300 Lastly, the data obtained from the interviews was *credible* in the sense that knowledge of  
301 playing-up was derived from youth who experienced it directly. The first author also achieved  
302 multivocality by exploring the experiences of multiple athletes within the same age range.

### 303 **Results**

304 Participants perceived that playing-up involved a balance between challenge and progress  
305 (see Table 1). First, participants discussed factors that made playing-up more difficult than  
306 playing at their age level. For example, participants believed that differences in size and skill  
307 between themselves and their older peers led them to make mistakes, which lowered their  
308 competence and confidence. Second, participants explained that when they were successful, or  
309 when they received support that made them feel that they were making progress, their  
310 competence and confidence rose to a higher level than they experienced from same-aged play. It  
311 should be noted that the thematic analysis did not indicate prominent differences in athletes'  
312 experiences of playing-up based on gender.

#### 313 **Perceptions of Challenge**

314 Playing-up posed physical and psychosocial challenges for the participants. The most  
315 challenging conditions involved in playing-up were coping with intensity and fitting in.

#### 316 ***Coping with Intensity***

317 Participants believed that playing-up was more intense than playing at their age level  
318 because they competed against older peers who were faster, stronger, and more skilled.  
319 However, participants felt they could improve fitness and skill by competing with older peers.  
320 Participant 5 (male, aged 17 years) suggested that because his opponents had a wide range of

321 skills, he was exposed to diverse experiences that were conducive to skill acquisition. According  
322 to Participant 5, “every time you play somebody, it’s different. That’s the greatest part [about  
323 playing-up]. You’re not facing this mainstream player that you know you’re going to get around.  
324 . . and that’s definitely made me better.” For other participants, the immersive aspect of playing-  
325 up influenced performance-related adaptations:

326       Everyone’s faster and stronger, and some people say the best way to learn another  
327       language is to surround yourself in it. So, putting yourself in a stronger, faster age group,  
328       it really just makes you faster and stronger, because you have to keep up. (P6, male, aged  
329       14 years)

330 These examples highlight that participants felt challenged by competing against older peers who  
331 were faster and stronger. Participants perceived an increased intensity of practice and  
332 competition because their older peers set higher standards for performance. Several participants  
333 adjusted their self-expectations to match the standards of an older team. When participants  
334 achieved their self-expectations, they perceived benefit in terms of their sport-specific skill.

335       Playing-up was also perceived to be intense because it required participants to engage in  
336       higher volumes of training compared to when they played at their age level. Some participants  
337       believed that high training volumes helped them improve fitness and skill. Conversely, high  
338       training volumes occasionally left participants feeling exhausted and susceptible to injury.  
339       Moreover, Participant 14 (male, aged 16 years) had issues with overtraining, whereby his passion  
340       to work hard kept him from telling his coach when he was exhausted. From a different  
341       standpoint, several participants struggled with work-life balance due to the increased time  
342       demands of training. Participant 7 (male, aged 17 years) explained that playing-up meant that  
343       “you don’t get to spend a lot of time with your friends, ‘cause you’re doing a lot more stuff to

344 improve your physicality.” He went on to say that “one of the biggest sacrifices [of playing-up]  
345 is that you gotta decrease your friendship time.” Overall, playing-up demanded that participants  
346 make sacrifices in their social and academic lives to focus on training and competition. Playing-  
347 up was especially challenging for those participants who felt that this sacrifice was not  
348 worthwhile.

349         Due to the increased intensity that participants associated with playing-up, they perceived  
350 that they made more mistakes when playing-up compared to when they played with same-aged  
351 peers. Participants responded to making mistakes in different ways. Generally, participants felt  
352 an initial decrease in competence and confidence when they made mistakes. Some participants  
353 changed their performance to prevent individual mistakes, but in ways that were detrimental to  
354 team success. For example, Participant 3’s (female, aged 16 years) fear of making mistakes  
355 affected her strategy as a defender:

356             I’m on defense, so you always wanna get rid of the ball. But if you hold onto the ball and  
357             make plays—when I’m more confident, I’ll do that. But when I’m low on confidence. . . I  
358             just wanna boot it down the field. I find I make more useful plays when I’m confident.

359 Participant 3 commented that when she was worried about making mistakes, she played with less  
360 confidence and hindered her team’s performance. In this example, she minimized the risk of  
361 making a mistake (i.e., by conceding a goal) at the expense of keeping possession for her team.

362         However, other participants associated the act of making mistakes with more positive  
363 outcomes. For instance, Participant 14 (male, aged 16 years) suggested that making mistakes  
364 allowed him to “develop a confidence that no matter how many times you get put down, you’re  
365 always gonna pick yourself back up.” Regarding performance, Participant 16 (male, aged 15  
366 years) disagreed with Participant 3 and reflected that he channeled the pressure he felt not to



367 make mistakes into creativity. Participant 16 avoided making mistakes by looking for his  
368 opponents' weaknesses and coming up with ways to exploit them. He said: "there are kids who  
369 are almost double my size, you have to find a way around it. You have to say to yourself: 'he  
370 definitely has a weakness. I have to exploit it.' You have to be creative in that sense." Taken  
371 together, while participants' competence and confidence were challenged when they made  
372 mistakes, some participants learned from their mistakes to adapt to the standards of playing-up.  
373 Participants did not discuss why making mistakes had varying effects on their sport-specific skill  
374 and psychosocial development.

### 375 *Fitting In*

376 From a social perspective, playing-up was challenging for participants because they  
377 found it difficult to connect with older peers. Social fault lines (e.g., differences in level of  
378 schooling, emotional maturity, team commitment, and city of residence) contributed to a lack of  
379 common ground between participants and their teammates. As Participant 11 (female, aged 14  
380 years) highlighted:

381 I don't know the girls that much, they know each other from a while and understand each  
382 other more. They talk about high school and exams. I'm not in high school, so I don't  
383 really understand what they're talking about. I don't get along with their conversations.

384 Participant 11 felt socially isolated because it was hard for her to relate to teammates who were  
385 at a different stage in school. In general, social fault lines challenged participants by contributing  
386 to varying levels of social isolation and a perceived lack of peer support.

387 Participants also felt pressure to perform well to prove their worth to an older team. If  
388 they performed badly, they perceived that they would lose their teammates' trust and respect,  
389 which would impair their ability to fit in. Some participants were frustrated by a lack of

390 opportunity to earn teammates' trust and respect. For one, Participant 5 (male, aged 17 years)  
391 struggled to show his skill because he felt his teammates rarely passed to him:

392         People were like "maybe I won't pass to this guy [i.e., P5], maybe I'll pass to somebody  
393         else that I know is good," right? Especially if he is one of the newcomers to the team. . .  
394         some people are like "I'm gonna trust the guys I know for a long time," even though they  
395         might not even be playing that great.

396 When Participant 5's teammates did not pass to him, he perceived a lack of trust and respect, and  
397 his competence and confidence decreased. He also reflected that a lack of trust and respect  
398 within his team could hinder performance, because his teammates would not use the space he  
399 occupied on the field. Overall, several participants gauged the level of trust and respect between  
400 themselves and their teammates based on how often they received the ball. This example  
401 illustrates that time on ball may indicate the extent to which athletes who play-up fit in with their  
402 older peers.

403         With regards to the coach, playing time was a key factor that influenced participants'  
404 ability to earn coaches' trust and respect. However, when Participant 14 (male, aged 16 years)  
405 received playing time from his coach and did not play well, he questioned if he deserved to play-  
406 up:

407         Say a coach gives you an opportunity, and you're playing 80 minutes. . . But you lose the  
408         game and miss a lot of chances. And you're taking it hard on yourself, because you think  
409         "do I deserve this?" And "I finally got my chance to prove myself, and I messed it up."

410 Participant 14's comment exemplified the pressure he felt to perform well or risk losing the trust  
411 and respect of his coach. He also mentioned that this pressure could contribute to self-doubt and  
412 decreased competence and confidence. Collectively, when participants did not have opportunities

413 to foster mutual trust and respect within an older team, they perceived negative implications for  
414 their sport-specific skill and psychosocial development.

415 Participants perceived that constructive feedback from coaches helped to foster mutual  
416 trust and respect. This type of feedback reduced the level of challenge participants associated  
417 with proving themselves as members of an older team. Participant 1 (female, aged 14 years)  
418 believed that constructive feedback from coaches included demonstrations or explanations of  
419 strategies to improve skill. When she discussed how coaches should give feedback to athletes  
420 who play-up, she said:

421 [As a coach,] you want to be strict, but you don't want to show it too much. . . at the same  
422 time, you'll be fixing their [i.e., athletes'] mistakes. You'll come up and take the ball, and  
423 you'll show them what they can do. But you won't be yelling at them.

424 However, when coaches gave corrective feedback without explaining how to improve,  
425 participants perceived a lack of trust and respect. They were also more likely to lose interest in  
426 the game or drop out. Thus, Participant 14 (male, aged 16 years) recommended that feedback  
427 from coaches should include both "criticism and encouragement." In sum, it was challenging for  
428 participants to earn the trust and respect of older teammates (i.e., as competitors) and coaches  
429 (i.e., as selectors). Participants felt that constructive feedback and opportunities to show their  
430 skill facilitated trust and respect between themselves and others, which helped them to fit in.

### 431 **Perceptions of Progress**

432 Beyond the challenges of playing-up, participants described experiences that facilitated  
433 progress with regard to their sport-specific skill and psychosocial development. Playing-up  
434 conjured feelings of progress because it involved being recognized, experiencing success, and  
435 developing expertise.

436 *Being Recognized*

437           When coaches invited participants to play-up, they complimented them on their  
438 performance and communicated that they believed in them. As a result, participants felt  
439 recognized for their sport-specific skill and perceived an increase in confidence because they  
440 were “wanted” by coaches despite their younger age. Moreover, Participant 7 (male, aged 17  
441 years) implied that recognition from his coach was a driving force behind his decision to play-up.  
442 He explained that after he tried out to play-up, his coach said that he “watched how he [i.e., P7]  
443 played and believed that he should be a part of his team.” This comment made Participant 7  
444 “want to try hard to show him [i.e., the coach] that he could become the best player on the team.”  
445 Indeed, several participants perceived greater motivation to improve fitness and skill when  
446 coaches voiced their belief in them. For some participants, this motivation manifested in the form  
447 of doing extra practice at home, working out, or watching previous games on film to self-  
448 evaluate performance. However, according to Participant 14 (male, aged 16 years), recognition  
449 from others did not give him a sense of progress when he did not believe that the recognition was  
450 justified. Participant 11 (female, aged 14 years) similarly experienced a loss of confidence and  
451 motivation to play-up because she disagreed with her coach’s feelings that she was good enough  
452 to do it. Overall, Participants 14 and 11 emphasized the importance of self-belief for positive  
453 playing-up experiences.

454           Participants also perceived that playing-up improved their social capital and contributed  
455 to recognition from same-aged peers. When Participant 12 (male, aged 16 years) discussed how  
456 it felt to be an athlete who played-up, he described feeling proud “when people went up to him  
457 and he said ‘oh, I play a year up,’ and they were like ‘oh, wow!’” The pride participants felt  
458 when they told others that they played-up increased their confidence and motivated them to give

459 their best effort in practices and games. Conversely, Participant 15 (male, aged 16 years) warned  
460 that if athletes played-up only to gain social status, they might become discouraged by the  
461 difference in quality between themselves and their teammates, and they might lose confidence.  
462 According to Participant 15: “it’s not good to go straight to playing a year up just to have the  
463 status of playing a year up.” Therefore, while the recognition garnered by participants could  
464 instil feelings of progress, it could also attract athletes to play-up for the wrong reasons.

#### 465 *Experiencing Success*

466 Participants conceptualized success in terms of improvements in sport-specific skill and  
467 the quality of intra-team social relationships. When participants experienced success with older  
468 peers, they perceived that they were making progress and gained competence and confidence.  
469 Some participants attributed progress to the fact that they competed at a level where they made  
470 mistakes but also succeeded. Participant 16 (male, aged 15 years) felt that any decreases in  
471 competence and confidence due to his mistakes would be offset by increases in these outcomes  
472 when he succeeded:

473 You have to think positively as that you’re younger, and these kids are older than you,  
474 and you’re still competing with them, you’re still besting them at some points. Yes,  
475 you’re losing to them, but when you win, it makes it all that much better.

476 Participant 16 implied that the competence and confidence he gained from succeeding against  
477 older peers outweighed the discouragement that came from his failures. Moreover, he perceived  
478 greater feelings of progress by succeeding against older peers versus same-aged peers because he  
479 felt that he was overcoming adversity (i.e., in having less time to develop) to achieve success.

480 Teammates and coaches played an important role in facilitating participants’ successful  
481 experiences. According to some participants, the exchange of information between themselves

482 and their teammates and coaches was vital for improving competence and confidence. For  
483 example, Participant 5 (male, aged 17 years) credited his teammates for teaching him how to  
484 decide “when to play a pass, when to shoot, and when to look up,” and Participant 17 (male,  
485 aged 14 years) acknowledged his coach for demonstrating “different skill moves to get around a  
486 defender.” Some participants were also involved in teaching their older teammates. When  
487 Participant 14 (male, aged 16 years) gave constructive feedback to older teammates, he  
488 perceived an increase in confidence. He explained: “the second you correct someone, it’s kind of  
489 like they think ‘okay, this kid knows what he’s talking about.’ And then you get the confidence  
490 to talk more.” These examples demonstrate how participants experienced success by learning  
491 from and teaching others. When coaches encouraged athletes who played-up to share tactical  
492 knowledge with older peers, their learning experiences were rewarding and contributed to  
493 feelings of progress.

494 Another way in which participants perceived success was by making friends and  
495 integrating socially into an older team. By spending time and connecting with older teammates,  
496 participants learned which behaviors were socially acceptable at older ages. Participant 15 (male,  
497 aged 16 years) suggested that playing-up helped him “to adapt to the way [older peers] talk. . .  
498 and the way they act.” He added: “[playing-up] makes you used to dealing with different kinds  
499 of people. . . so then the social awkwardness isn’t really there.” In this sense, playing-up offered  
500 Participant 15 a range of peer interactions that contributed to social adaptability. These  
501 interactions led to feelings of progress when he perceived that he could more easily foster social  
502 connections inside and outside of sport.

503 Participants commented that their teammates and coaches influenced their social success.  
504 Teammates and coaches contributed to successful social experiences by introducing themselves

505 and engaging in bonding activities. First, participants appreciated when their teammates and  
506 coaches welcomed them into the team because it communicated that they “were willing to take  
507 in a new [and younger] player” (P5, male, aged 17 years). Moreover, participants preferred  
508 informal to formal introductions. Participant 16 (male, aged 15 years) believed that when  
509 coaches told athletes to introduce themselves, the interactions felt forced and instilled less  
510 support than would have been achieved if the teammates stepped forward on their own. For  
511 instance, a teammate of Participant 3 (female, aged 16 years) stepped forward by asking to be her  
512 partner for a drill. This connection helped Participant 3 to feel cared for as a member of her team  
513 and it also made it easier for her to connect with other teammates (i.e., by talking casually with  
514 her teammate’s friends during a break). Second, it was enjoyable for participants to engage in  
515 bonding activities such as team dinners and fundraising events because they could socialize with  
516 older peers. Participant 2 (female, aged 15 years) suggested that bonding activities also helped to  
517 minimize subgroup formation because “when you’re doing those activities, there’s no groups. . .  
518 you just get to know everyone more.” Taken together, participants perceived that they were  
519 making progress when they successfully connected with older peers. It was easier for participants  
520 to succeed psychosocially when their teammates and coaches introduced themselves and  
521 facilitated bonding activities.

522         Additionally, some participants appreciated when coaches showed them special attention.  
523 For example, when the coach of Participant 1 (female, aged 14 years) gave her feedback in an  
524 especially gentle tone, she was receptive to her coach’s advice and was not discouraged by his  
525 criticism. However, most participants advised that coaches should avoid behaviours that could be  
526 interpreted as favouritism. Participant 13 (female, aged 13 years) felt that coaches who favoured  
527 athletes who played-up took the fun out of practice:

528 [Coaches should not] go easy on them. . . [or] give them special treatment on the team,  
529 'cause that's never fun. Because the other people will be like: 'oh, she gets special  
530 treatment 'cause she's a year younger.'

531 Participant 13's comment was echoed by Participant 14 (male, aged 16 years), who argued that  
532 when coaches did not offer equal treatment to every team member, athletes who played-up  
533 became socially isolated and their teammates were more likely to see them as inferior. To  
534 provide individualized coaching without showing favouritism, Participant 2 (female, aged 15  
535 years) suggested that coaches could offer one-to-one interactions to all athletes. One-to-one  
536 interactions would allow coaches to satisfy athletes' needs in a discreet manner, without  
537 compromising the social status of athletes who play-up.

### 538 *Developing Expertise*

539 Finally, playing-up contributed to participants' perceptions of progress because it  
540 represented a milestone on their developmental pathway. Participant 7 (male, aged 17 years)  
541 mentioned that "it gets to the point [in playing-up] where you can see yourself at this  
542 competitiveness, playing in a higher standing." In this way, participants were motivated to  
543 compete with older teammates to acquire a foundation of fitness and skill that could help them  
544 attain expertise. This central factor inspired several participants' decisions to play-up.

545 As a result of playing-up, participants also gained opportunities to advance to higher  
546 levels of competition. As an example, Participant 6 (male, aged 14 years) mentioned that  
547 competing against a wide range of opponents benefitted his sport-specific skill because he  
548 learned to "see different playing styles and. . . how players are in different regions." The  
549 presence of scouts further increased participants' perceptions that playing-up could help them  
550 advance in soccer. Participant 2 (female, aged 15 years) mentioned that playing-up "allowed her



551 to go to international tournaments, which got university scouts to notice her and then offer her a  
552 scholarship.” In contrast, when Participant 11 (female, aged 14 years) considered the potential to  
553 be scouted, she felt torn; she could earn a scholarship to university, but playing varsity soccer  
554 was a major time commitment she did not want. She ultimately questioned whether or not she  
555 should play-up if she did not want to advance in soccer. Overall, these examples demonstrate  
556 that playing-up influenced participants’ perceptions that they were making progress toward  
557 becoming competitive athletes. However, for those who had less desire to develop expertise, they  
558 sometimes doubted if they belonged in a team with athletes who did.

### 559 **Discussion**

560 The purpose of this study was to explore youth athletes’ perceptions of playing-up in  
561 soccer and its perceived implications for their sport-specific skill and psychosocial development.  
562 Participants perceived that playing-up involved a balance between challenge and progress. They  
563 associated playing-up with challenges such as coping with a high intensity of competition and  
564 fitting in with older teammates. These challenges threatened participants’ competence and  
565 confidence, but when participants overcame them, they perceived improvements in fitness, skill,  
566 social capital, and social adaptability. In addition, participants perceived playing-up to be  
567 rewarding when they received recognition, experienced performance-based and social success,  
568 and gained opportunities to develop expertise. The extent to which participants perceived  
569 progress depended on the influence of their teammates and coaches. Overall, participants’  
570 perceptions of playing-up did not differ fundamentally based on gender.

571 This study presented two key findings related to participants’ playing-up experiences.  
572 First, participants perceived playing-up to benefit their sport-specific skill and psychosocial  
573 development when it involved diverse sport experiences with athletes who had varying skill sets.

574 The influence of within-sport diversity on athletes' skill acquisition and motivation to participate  
575 has been illustrated in past studies (e.g., Berry et al., 2008; Côté, 1999; Ford et al., 2009). It has  
576 also been suggested that greater diversity of experience may stimulate youth's interest in a  
577 specific activity (Hidi & Renninger, 2006). In the current study, competition against opponents  
578 who used a wide range of skills may have facilitated participants' skill acquisition and intrinsic  
579 motivation to engage with older peers. These findings are supported by those of Cumming and  
580 colleagues (2018), who found that early-maturing athletes who participated in bio-banding  
581 perceived a more diverse set of learning experiences that fostered their technical and  
582 psychosocial development. Tucker and colleagues (2016) suggested that aged-related differences  
583 in psychological maturity represent arguments against bio-banding. While these arguments also  
584 apply to playing-up, results from the current study indicated that several athletes who played-up  
585 perceived exposure to new challenges as a learning opportunity (Martindale & Nash, 2013).  
586 Further study is needed to understand the influence of practice and play activities on athletes'  
587 perceptions of challenge when they play-up.

588         Some participants also attributed improvements in sport-specific and psychosocial skills  
589 to their immersion in an environment where they perceived higher standards for performance.  
590 The underdog hypothesis may help to explain these perceptions (Gibbs et al., 2012; Kelly et al.,  
591 2020; Krogman, 1959). The underdog hypothesis states that in competitive environments, the  
592 challenge that less skilled athletes face may benefit their performance, however, this type of  
593 competitive environment could also be detrimental. For example, Duda (1987) warned against  
594 excessive social comparison in sport, explaining that athletes were more likely to burn out when  
595 they defined their sport success based on peer comparisons rather than goal achievement. In the  
596 current study, participants' perceptions of playing-up were somewhat supported by the underdog

597 hypothesis. Some participants reflected that their immersion with older peers helped them to  
598 adapt their fitness, skill, and social behavior. Playing-up may have contributed to these  
599 adaptations because athletes confronted a relatively high level of challenge and responded by  
600 developing positive habits of self-regulation (Cumming et al., 2018). However, for participants  
601 who experienced negative peer comparisons that were especially salient, playing-up may have  
602 impaired development because athletes felt that they could not measure up to the standards of an  
603 older team, and they lost the will to try. Overall, the complex relationship between playing-up  
604 and athlete development exemplifies that athletes do not perceive playing-up to be a  
605 homogeneous or *one-size-fits-all* experience. Thus, it may be interpreted that playing-up is not  
606 simply good or bad for athletes' sport-specific skill and psychosocial development.

607         As a second central finding, participants' integration into an older team depended on  
608 support from teammates and coaches. Participants most needed support in the form of  
609 welcoming introductions, constructive feedback, and opportunities to show skill. Previously,  
610 researchers found that similar strategies may improve task cohesion, social cohesion, and social  
611 identity in sport teams (De Backer et al., 2011; Eys et al., 2009). For instance, Eys and  
612 colleagues (2009) revealed that coaches could improve task cohesion through effective  
613 communication with athletes, and teammates could improve social cohesion by engaging athletes  
614 in outside activities. Furthermore, De Backer and colleagues (2011) showed that coach behaviors  
615 related to perceived justice and need support (i.e., support for autonomy, competence, and  
616 belongingness) were positively associated with athlete perceptions of team identification. The  
617 consistency in results between the current study and past works implies that familiar strategies  
618 may be used to establish cohesion and social identity when athletes play-up. In addition, the  
619 current study adds to existing literature by offering ways to improve cohesion and social identity

620 that apply specifically to playing-up. With regard to task cohesion, coaches may ask athletes to  
621 teach skills to older teammates. With regard to social cohesion, older teammates may have casual  
622 conversations with athletes. Finally, with regard to social identity, coaches may provide  
623 individualized feedback to each athlete, so that older teammates perceive athletes who play-up  
624 similarly to themselves.

625         Results from the current study highlight the important role that the coach plays in  
626 facilitating athletes' playing-up experiences. When coaches' behaviors suited athletes' specific  
627 needs (e.g., when coaches provided constructive feedback and opportunities to demonstrate  
628 skill), several athletes perceived benefit with regard to their developmental outcomes. Past  
629 research has identified coaches' ability to tailor to athletes' individual needs as a strong predictor  
630 of positive sport experiences (Vella et al., 2013). Additionally, Erickson and colleagues (2011)  
631 used state-space grids to show that an effective synchronized swimming coach directed more  
632 behaviors toward individual athletes, whereas an ineffective coach directed more behaviors  
633 toward the whole team. In the current study, coaches' tailored behaviors may have supported  
634 athletes' autonomy by conveying trust and respect for their abilities, and thereby increasing their  
635 perceptions of competence (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). Thus, coaches may be more likely to  
636 enhance the holistic development of athletes who play-up through the use of tailored behaviors.

637         In the context of the PAF, the interaction between the dynamic elements of quality social  
638 dynamics and appropriate settings appeared to play a key role in athletes' playing-up experiences  
639 (Côté et al., 2014; Vierimaa et al., 2017). Previous research in child development and education  
640 noted the importance of social and environmental influences on youth's physical and  
641 psychological development (e.g., Piaget, 1952; Vygotsky, 1978). In addition, the works of  
642 Bruner (1977) and Vygotsky (1978) implied that in the context of playing-up, teammates and

643 coaches may foster athlete development by helping athletes to apply new knowledge (i.e.,  
644 scaffolding). When athletes who play-up collaborated with teammates and coaches, they learned  
645 from activities that they might not otherwise have been able to complete (Gray, 2011). In this  
646 way, playing-up exposed athletes to peer and coach interactions that occurred within a sport  
647 environment that supported their zone of proximal development (ZPD; Gray, 2011; Hill et al.,  
648 2020; Vygotsky, 1978). Similar to Hill and colleagues (2020), who commented that bio-banding  
649 provided athletes with the resources needed to stay within their ZPD, findings from this study  
650 imply that the social and environmental factors implicated in playing-up affect athletes' sport-  
651 specific skill and psychosocial development by situating them within their ZPD. Further research  
652 may advance knowledge of playing-up by exploring how social and environmental factors  
653 impact athletes' perceptions of competence, confidence, connection and character (i.e., the 4C's;  
654 Côté et al., 2014; Vierimaa et al., 2017).

### 655 **Practical Applications, Limitations, and Future Directions**

656 This study is the first to explore athletes' perceptions of playing-up. A key strength of  
657 this study is that it presents new knowledge regarding the factors that contribute to positive and  
658 negative playing-up experiences. Practitioners may use this knowledge to improve the playing-  
659 up experiences of future athletes. As such, teammates and coaches might consider four strategies  
660 to facilitate positive playing-up experiences. First, teammates and coaches may get to know  
661 athletes who play-up as people. They may also offer to include them in team activities that occur  
662 inside and outside of sport (e.g., practice activities that involve small groups, casual  
663 conversations, bonding activities). This behavior would communicate a desire to help athletes  
664 who play-up to integrate into the team's social dynamics. Second, coaches may provide  
665 constructive feedback to athletes who play-up while recognizing the pressures they may feel to

666 prove their worth and relate socially to older peers. In one-to-one interactions, coaches may offer  
667 a combination of encouragement and corrective feedback to help athletes improve sport-specific  
668 skill while also facilitating mutual trust and respect. Third, teammates and coaches may  
669 encourage athletes to share knowledge during tactical discussions. As a result, athletes may gain  
670 competence and social acceptance, which would make them more likely to attend to others'  
671 advice. Fourth, coaches may structure the sport environment to allow athletes to show their skill  
672 in front of their older peers. Coaches may change the structure of the sport environment by  
673 introducing activities that require older peers to cooperate with athletes who play-up in order to  
674 be successful.

675         The current study's findings also shed light on factors within playing-up that may be  
676 indicative of youth development. For example, sport practitioners may gauge the extent to which  
677 athletes who play-up are establishing mutual trust and respect with teammates based on how  
678 often they receive the ball in training and competition. Coaches may facilitate trust and respect  
679 between athletes who play-up and their older peers by providing them with playing time and  
680 allowing them to demonstrate activities for the rest of the team. In addition, this study showed  
681 that athletes who play-up may exhibit independent motivation to improve fitness and skill by  
682 practicing at home, working out, or watching film of past games. Sport practitioners may inspire  
683 athletes' independent motivation by complimenting them on their play and communicating that  
684 they believe in their ability to achieve athletic and personal success on an older team.

685         Beyond this study's practical implications, its results must be interpreted in light of some  
686 important limitations. For instance, eight out of the 17 participants shared the same coach, and  
687 they thought favorably of this coach's ability to develop athletes who play-up. In addition, the  
688 final sample included 15 participants who played-up at the time of data collection, but only two

689 participants who withdrew from playing-up. These factors collectively imply that this study may  
690 be subject to selection bias (Norris, 1997). As a result, this study may present an overly positive  
691 account of playing-up in youth soccer, despite the inclusion of participants who played-up and  
692 then returned to same-aged play.

693 Future research is warranted in several areas to advance current understandings of  
694 playing-up. First, the processes involved in playing-up may be simpler or more complex than  
695 those described in this study. Future studies may explore differences in key stakeholders'  
696 perceptions of playing-up based on contextual factors such as sport, sport type (e.g., individual or  
697 team), level of competition, age of participants, gender, ethnicity, race, and sociocultural status  
698 (Côté & Gilbert, 2009). Second, research is needed to explore how the sport-specific and  
699 psychosocial skills of athletes who play-up compare to those of athletes who play at their age  
700 level. Quantitative studies may help to shed light on sport-specific and psychosocial factors that  
701 may indicate athletes' suitability to play-up. This research could offer recommendations for  
702 practitioners regarding when it is appropriate for coaches to play-up youth athletes. Third, in  
703 accordance with the PAF, future research may contribute to a richer understanding of playing-up  
704 by exploring its influence on athletes' competence, confidence, connection, and character (i.e.,  
705 the 4Cs; Côté et al., 2014; Vierimaa et al., 2017). Finally, once sufficient evidence is accrued,  
706 data from athletes who play-up may be used to reform playing-up policies so that athletes might  
707 benefit from their own recommendations. In bridging the research-to-practice gap, further study  
708 may elucidate the best methods to translate knowledge about positive playing-up experiences for  
709 athletes, teammates, coaches, and parents.

710 **Conclusion**

711           This study provides a foundation of research on athletes' experiences of playing-up.  
 712 Researchers used a qualitative interview approach rooted in relativist ontology and subjectivist  
 713 epistemology to explore how athletes perceived playing-up to influence their sport-specific skill  
 714 and psychosocial development. Generally, participants perceived playing-up to involve a balance  
 715 between challenge and progress. Participants also offered guidance to teammates and coaches on  
 716 how to provide support. Namely, participants found that when teammates were welcoming and  
 717 involved them in group activities, and coaches gave constructive feedback and encouragement,  
 718 they were more likely to reap improvements in areas such as fitness, skill, confidence, social  
 719 capital, and social adaptability. Further study is warranted to advance knowledge regarding how  
 720 playing-up affects athletes differently based on context, and when it is appropriate for youth  
 721 athletes to play-up.

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916 **Table 1**

917 *High- and low-order themes describing participant perceptions of playing-up*

High-order themes	Low-order themes	Example quotations
Perceptions of		
challenge	Coping with intensity	<i>“putting yourself in a stronger, faster age group, it really just makes you faster and stronger, because you have to keep up.”</i> (P6, male, aged 14 years)
	Fitting in	<i>“I don’t know the girls that much. . . They talk about high school and exams. I’m not in high school, so I don’t really. . . get along with their conversations.”</i> (P11, female, aged 14 years)
Perceptions of		
progress	Being recognized	<i>“I like it when people go up to me and I say ‘oh, I play a year up,’ and they’re like ‘oh, wow!’”</i> (P12, male, aged 16 years)
	Experiencing success	<i>“these kids are older than you, and you’re still competing with them. . . Yes, you’re losing to them, but when you win, it makes it all that much better.”</i> (P16, male, aged 15 years)
	Developing expertise	<i>“it gets to the point [in playing-up] where you can see yourself. . . playing in a higher standing.”</i> (P7, male, aged 17 years)

919 **Appendix: Semi-Structured Interview Guide**

920 **General Introduction and Research Purpose**

921 Thank you for participating in my research project. The purpose of this research is to  
922 understand what playing-up (i.e., playing sports at a higher age level) looks and feels like to you,  
923 and how it affects you as an athlete and a person. By sharing your experiences with me, I hope to  
924 use your knowledge to make playing-up even better for future athletes.

925 During our discussion, you will be able to discuss how you think and feel about playing-  
926 up. Please note that there are no right or wrong answers to the questions I will ask you. In  
927 addition, your participation in this discussion is voluntary, in that you do not have to answer any  
928 questions you do not feel comfortable answering. If you would like to stop the discussion at any  
929 time, there will be no consequences.

930 I would like to remind you that the information you share in our discussion will be kept  
931 in confidence. Your responses will not be shared with your parents, coaches, or teammates.  
932 When our discussion is over, if there is anything you would like to add or remove from the  
933 interview transcript, please contact me and I will make the necessary changes. Finally, I would  
934 like to ask if you are comfortable with my taking an audio recording of our conversation. This  
935 recording would allow me to check that I have understood and written out your comments  
936 correctly. Do you have any questions or concerns about this? If not, I will start the audio  
937 recording. [*Start the audio recording if the athlete consents.*]

938 Do you have any final questions before we begin? If not, please confirm your consent to  
939 participate by saying: “I consent to participate in this study.” [*Proceed if the athlete consents.*]

940 **Participant Introduction**

941 Thank you for your cooperation. I would like to start by asking you a couple of questions  
942 about your sport background:

943 1. Tell me a little bit about how you got involved in soccer.

944 - What do you enjoy the most about playing soccer?

945 2. Describe the team you play with right now.

946 - How does it make you feel to be a member of this team?

### 947 **Introduction to Playing-Up**

948 Thank you for telling me about your involvement in soccer and the team you play with  
949 right now. I would like to move on to the main focus of our discussion, which is your experience  
950 of playing-up. My next question relates to the decision for you to play-up:

951 3. Tell me how you learned about the opportunity to play up.

952 - Who was the most important person in making the decision for you to play-up for the  
953 first time?

954 - Describe how the decision was made the first time you played-up.

955 - Describe how the decision was made in other cases when you played-up.

956 - For how many years have you been playing-up?

### 957 **General Discussion**

958 At this stage, I would like to discuss what playing-up means to you and how it may have  
959 affected your development. When answering the following questions, you can think about your  
960 overall experience of playing-up, consider one specific season when you played-up, or compare  
961 different seasons if you had different experiences.

962 4. Tell me about what it feels like to be an athlete who plays-up.

963 - What do you think playing-up is?

- 964 - What does playing-up mean to you?
- 965 - What do you enjoy the most about playing-up?
- 966 - What do you enjoy the least about playing-up?
- 967 - What do you think are the benefits of playing-up?
- 968 - What do you think are the drawbacks of playing-up?

969 **Conclusion**

970 As we approach the end of our time together, I have some final questions to round out our  
971 conversation and offer closure:

- 972 5. Looking back, what would have made your playing-up experiences better?
- 973 6. What advice would you give to other athletes who may be thinking about playing-up?
- 974 - What advice would you give to the coaches of athletes who play-up?
- 975 - What advice would you give to the teammates of athletes who play-up?
- 976 - Would you recommend playing-up to other athletes? Why or why not?
- 977 7. As we end the discussion, do you have any final thoughts about playing-up that you feel are  
978 important and that we did not already cover?
- 979 8. Do you have any questions for me?

980 We will end the discussion here. Thank you very much again for participating in my  
981 research project and sharing your thoughts and feelings about playing-up. I will remind you that  
982 if you would like or add or take away from the information you shared during the interview, you  
983 can contact me by email and I will make the required changes.