



University of
Lethbridge

News Release

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Master's student initiates study on youth ADHD experience in sport

Participants sought to take part in project

A new study by a University of Lethbridge master's student seeks to broaden the understanding of how the presence of youth diagnosed with ADHD are perceived and addressed in team sport environments. Results are intended to add to the scant literature on the subject and open conversations around supporting neurodiverse individuals, their teammates and coaches to create positive sport experiences.

Justine Cotnoir is leading the project through a personal lens. She was diagnosed with ADHD when she was just six years old and found sport as a means of regulation that has allowed her to thrive in other aspects of her life.

"I was very lucky to get diagnosed early in life and to be diagnosed by a neuropsychologist who really had the tools to give my family information about what my specific challenges were," says Cotnoir, who participated in ultimate frisbee and competitive swimming as a youth. "Sport was really important for me. I would struggle to focus or manage my time, and it was hard for me to sit down and devote an hour to homework. When I had frisbee practice, it regulated my whole day, and my schedule would be built around it. After that dopamine boost of physical activity, I was able to sit down for longer periods of time and focus on my schoolwork."



Originally from Sherbrooke, Que., Cotnoir earned a Bachelor of Arts in psychology at Bishop's University. As an undergraduate student, she wrote an honours thesis examining the prevalence of ADHD athletes competing in university sport, as well as novel research on how having ADHD might be advantageous in certain contexts — such as sport.

Ulethbridge kinesiology professor Dr. Scott Rathwell met Cotnoir at a research conference and was impressed with her work. Even though her research focus didn't exactly align with his, he agreed to supervise her master's studies.

"Most of my work has focused on adult sport participants (Masters athletes) and how we can optimize their environment to promote commitment and enhance/maintain performance as one ages," says Rathwell. "I have always been interested in understanding what a quality experience is for athletes and how to optimize their experiences. Justine has just led me to shift that focus to athletes with ADHD."

Cotnoir says that while sport experiences can be highly beneficial for those diagnosed with ADHD, there are some challenges for young athletes with ADHD, their teammates and coaches.

"Much of what I've heard has been people telling me they sometimes had problems where their symptoms presented in a sport setting. They were being misunderstood, or they were punished for talking too much or not listening. Some said they quit a sport or their parents took them out because they didn't feel the coaches were meeting their needs just because they behaved differently," says Cotnoir.

While there are studies that have some of these anecdotes, they are complementary to the focus of the work. Hers will focus solely on those experiences.

"I think one of the greatest strengths of this project is that it is being led by someone who understands both the science and the lived reality of ADHD in sport," Rathwell says of Cotnoir. "Justine's experience positions her to see things that others might miss, ask questions that truly matter, and design research that reflects the actual experiences of the end user in mind. I think having her as the lead improves our chances of publishing something that is empathetic, credible and genuinely impactful."

Cotnoir aims to have a minimum of 300 people take the survey, which is open to any current or former athlete who has participated in competitive team sport between the ages of five to 17, as well as parents of children who currently or previously participated in a team sport and youth sport coaches. The broad cross section will give her a holistic view of the ADHD experience in sport. Following completion of the surveys, she will identify smaller groups for follow-up interviews that will serve as case studies. Those interested in taking part can follow this link: <https://linktr.ee/surveylinks>, and are eligible to win one of three \$25 gift cards upon completion.

"I'd like to say we're adding a piece to the puzzle in providing a better understanding of how ADHD is perceived and addressed in youth team sport environments," says Cotnoir. "In the long term, maybe this will help shape future studies and lead to some practical ways to help those youth with ADHD who are participating in sport to have a positive and supportive experience as well as their coaches and parents."

To view online: <https://www.ulethbridge.ca/unews/article/ulethbridge-masters-student-initiates-study-youth-adhd-experiences-sport>

PHOTOS:

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