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Management Strategies for Enhancing Participation and Retention in Community Sport Programs

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ABSTRACT: Community sport programs are often expected to widen participation, strengthen local health outcomes, and sustain active involvement, yet many clubs continue to lose participants after initial registration. This study examined whether a structured management package could improve attendance, satisfaction, sense of community, support for coach autonomy, and 16-week retention among men enrolled in community sport programs. We used a men-only, club-level quasi-experimental design with 312 participants from 12 community sport clubs, allocated to usual management (n = 155) or an enhanced management package (n = 157) consisting of coach briefing, flexible scheduling, buddy contact, rapid participant feedback, and targeted support for practical barriers. We defined retention as continued registration and attendance at least one session during the final month of the program. We set statistical significance at $p < 0.05$. Baseline characteristics did not differ significantly between groups. Retention was higher under the enhanced management package than under usual management (80.9% vs. 69.0%; $\chi^2 = 5.24$, $p = 0.022$), with an 11.9-percentage-point risk difference and an unadjusted odds ratio of 1.90 (95% CI: 1.12-3.21). Linear mixed modelling showed a significant group-by-month interaction for attendance ($\beta = 0.039$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that the intervention slowed the typical decline in attendance over time. Logistic regression, adjusted for age, baseline attendance, sport experience, fee burden, and work-schedule conflict, confirmed that the enhanced management package was associated with higher odds of retention (adjusted OR = 1.89, 95% CI: 1.12-3.20, $p = 0.018$). Satisfaction, sense of community, and coach autonomy support improved more in the enhanced-management condition than in the control condition (all between-group change $p < 0.001$). The findings indicate that retention in community sport depends not only on participant motivation but also on manageable organizational factors shaped by scheduling, coach communication, social integration, and service responsiveness.

Keywords: community sport; sport management; participation; retention; attendance; coaching; satisfaction; logistic regression.

I. INTRODUCTION

Community sport programs sit at the point where public health ambition, local recreation, and organized sport development meet. Their value lies not only in providing opportunities for exercise, but also in creating stable social environments where men can form routines, develop skills, experience belonging, and remain connected to active lifestyles. For clubs and local sport agencies, the most difficult managerial task is not simply attracting a new participant for an opening session; it is helping that participant return often enough for sport to become part of ordinary weekly life. Contemporary participation models therefore describe sport involvement as a pathway that includes entry, continuation, progression, and possible withdrawal, rather than

as a single act of registration [1]. From this perspective, retention becomes a central indicator of program quality because a club that repeatedly recruits men but loses them quickly carries higher administrative costs, weaker group cohesion, and limited long-term health and social impact.

A lifespan policy view strengthens this argument by showing that personal, interpersonal, organizational, and policy conditions interact to shape participation [2]. Men may enter community sport with different histories of sport experience, fitness confidence, work schedules, family responsibilities, injury concerns, and expectations about competition or social connection. Some of these factors are outside a club's direct control. However, many of the conditions that influence continued attendance are open to management action: the time and predictability of sessions, the tone of coach communication, the way new members are welcomed, the clarity of fees and roles, the speed of responses to absence, and the extent to which participants feel listened to. A retention strategy is therefore not an administrative add-on; it is part of the sport experience itself.

The need for a management focus is especially clear when participation is examined over time. Longitudinal evidence shows that registration counts can conceal meaningful movement into and out of sport, so clubs must track whether participants return across seasons and remain engaged after initial entry [3]. Work linking registration information with participant feedback has also shown the practical value of combining behavioral data with experience data when clubs try to understand why people stay or leave [4]. These insights matter because many community programs still judge success by the number of men registered at the start of a cycle, while paying less attention to attendance patterns, early warning signs of disengagement, or the quality of follow-up after missed sessions.

Participation and dropout are best understood as multi-level processes. Socio-ecological research shows that continuation in organized sport depends on factors at the individual, family, peer, coach, school or workplace, club, and wider community levels [5]. Reviews of sport dropout have identified recurring reasons for withdrawal, including declining enjoyment, perceived lack of competence, social pressure, competing commitments, injury, cost, and dissatisfaction with the sport environment [6], [7]. Although much of this evidence has been developed in youth and adolescent settings, the underlying management lesson is relevant for adult community sport: participants rarely leave for one reason only. Dropout usually results from accumulated friction between the participant's expectations and the experience the program provides.

This accumulated-friction view helps community sport managers shift attention from blaming the individual to improving the system around them. A man who misses two sessions because of work may still intend to return, but the club's response can shape the likelihood of return: whether it notices the absence, sends practical information, offers a realistic route back, and maintains a welcoming social connection. Similarly, a new participant who feels less skilled than the group may stay if the coach normalizes different ability levels and provides meaningful roles within the session. Studies of prolonged engagement and transitions out of organized sport emphasize that continued participation depends on the quality of the ongoing experience, not only on the motivation present at registration [8], [9]. Prospective evidence on team-sport dropout further supports observing participation as it unfolds over time rather than after withdrawal [10].

Persistence in sport is more likely when participants experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and less likely when the environment feels controlling, socially cold, or poorly matched to personal goals. Prospective research on sport persistence and dropout has linked motivational quality with later continuation [11], [12]. Autonomy-supportive coaching is also associated with more self-determined motivation among athletes [13], while reviews in exercise and physical activity show that self-determination theory offers a strong explanation for adherence behavior [14]. For community sport management, this evidence means that coach briefing, communication routines, and participant feedback procedures are not soft or peripheral concerns. They are practical mechanisms through which clubs can strengthen the psychological conditions that support attendance.

Participation in sport is associated with psychological and social benefits, including confidence, social connection, and emotional well-being when the setting is supportive [15]. At the same time, participants choose between different sport settings, including clubs, gyms, informal public spaces, and home-based activity, according to their motivations, constraints, and desired experiences [16]. Community clubs therefore compete not only with other clubs but also with many alternative uses of time. To retain men, especially those returning to sport after a break or balancing sport with employment and family commitments, clubs must offer a clear

value proposition: enjoyable sessions, predictable organization, respectful coaching, and a sense of being recognized as a member of the group.

Community sport clubs can be more than places to play; they can operate as local institutions that support health, social inclusion, and civic connection [17]. However, delivering these outcomes depends on whether clubs can sustain participation. Evidence on community-sport service provision indicates that participant satisfaction and participation behavior are linked to the quality of facilities, staff and volunteer interaction, communication, and the overall service experience [18]. Similar findings from sport and leisure service research show that perceived quality, value, satisfaction, and future intentions are closely connected [19]. Retention is therefore partly a service-quality issue, although it remains grounded in sport's distinctive social and developmental character.

They often rely on volunteer coaches, part-time administrators, shared facilities, and short funding cycles. Organizational capacity research shows that nonprofit and voluntary sport clubs must balance human resources, financial capacity, infrastructure, planning, external relationships, and program delivery demands [20]. Clubs may have strong ambition to grow participation but may lack the systems needed to identify participants at risk of dropping out, train coaches in retention-supportive practice, or collect feedback in a way that leads to timely action [22], [23]. Partnerships can help clubs connect with wider community resources, but clubs still need to translate partnership benefits into day-to-day management routines [24].

Constraint research indicates that time, cost, access, motivation, and perceived competence can shape recreational sport involvement [25]. Loyalty and psychological commitment develop when participants perceive value, involvement, and a meaningful relationship with the organization [26]. A man may start a program because it is nearby or affordable, but he is more likely to stay when the program becomes enjoyable, socially meaningful, and easy to integrate into his routine. Fun, positive experiences, and a sense of personal relevance are repeatedly identified as central to sustained sport involvement [28]. Commitment models similarly highlight that enjoyment, involvement alternatives, personal investment, social constraints, and opportunities for valued involvement shape continued participation [29]. Evidence from adult tennis and Masters swimming shows that commitment and social influence remain relevant in adult sport contexts, not only in youth sport [30].

Despite this evidence base, a gap remains between what is known about participation and what community clubs routinely implement. Many published studies identify predictors of dropout or describe conceptual models, but fewer translate those ideas into a low-cost management package that ordinary clubs can apply during a short program cycle.

1. AIMS

- To compare 16-week retention between men enrolled in usual-management community sport programs and men enrolled in programs using an enhanced management package.
- To examine whether the management package improves attendance trajectories across four months of programming.
- To assess whether participant satisfaction, sense of community, and perceived coach autonomy support change more favorably under the enhanced management package.
- To identify adjusted predictors of retention after accounting for age, baseline attendance, sport experience, fee burden, and work-schedule conflict.

2. HYPOTHESES

- Men in the enhanced-management condition will have higher 16-week retention than men in the usual-management condition.
- Attendance will decline less sharply over time in the enhanced-management condition than in the usual-management condition.
- Satisfaction, sense of community, and coach autonomy support will improve more in the enhanced-management condition than in the control condition.
- Follow-up satisfaction and sense of community will partly explain the relationship between the management package and retention.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Socio-ecological evidence indicates that organized sport continuation depends on factors operating at the individual, interpersonal, organizational, community, and policy levels [5]. At the individual level, competence, enjoyment, injury, motivation, and competing priorities matter. At the interpersonal level, coach behavior, peer relationships, and family or social support are influential. At the organizational level, clubs shape participation through program cost, session timing, facility access, communication quality, and clarity of expectations.

Systematic reviews of sport dropout consistently identify lack of enjoyment, perceived lack of competence, social pressure, competing priorities, and physical factors as frequent reasons for withdrawal [6]. A broader review of youth sport attrition also found that established correlates are typically social or psychological rather than purely demographic [7]. Although much of this evidence comes from younger samples, the management implications are relevant to adult community sport: participants are more likely to stay when the sport environment feels worthwhile, socially connected, and compatible with their everyday lives.

Qualitative and longitudinal work shows that dropout and sustained engagement are often shaped by the quality of the sport experience over time, not a single decision point [8]. A transitional perspective on adolescent sport withdrawal similarly illustrates that quitting can emerge gradually as meanings, priorities, and identities shift [9]. More recent prospective evidence from team sport dropout confirms that psychosocial predictors are central to understanding who stays and who leaves [10]. These findings encourage managers to monitor experience and attendance repeatedly rather than waiting until participants disappear from the program.

Motivation research provides a useful explanation for why managerial routines can influence retention. A prospective study of handball players showed that motivational patterns were associated with dropout over time [11]. Perceived autonomy support and self-regulation have also been linked to persistence in sport and physical activity contexts [12]. In practice, participants are more likely to return when coaches offer choice, acknowledge effort, explain tasks clearly, and support competence rather than relying only on pressure or authority.

Autonomy-supportive coaching has been associated with more self-determined forms of motivation among athletes [13]. A systematic review of self-determination theory in exercise and physical activity also supports the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness for sustained behavior [14]. These constructs align closely with community sport management. A coach briefing that emphasizes encouragement, role clarity, individualized feedback, and respectful communication can change the climate of sessions without requiring major financial investment.

Sport participation also offers psychological and social benefits, including improved self-esteem, social interaction, and connectedness, especially in supportive environments [15]. Settings differ, however. People who participate in sport clubs, gyms, or public spaces vary in motives, goals, and participation frequency [16]. Community sport clubs therefore cannot assume that registration alone creates commitment. They must design experiences that fit participant motives while preserving the distinctive social and developmental qualities of club-based sport [17].

Evidence from community sport service provision shows that facilities, grassroots sport organizations, and activity programs can influence satisfaction and participation intentions [18]. Similarly, research on sport and leisure centers shows that perceived quality, value, and satisfaction are associated with future intentions [19]. In practical terms, a participant deciding whether to return evaluates not only the sport activity itself but also communication, punctuality, fairness, convenience, and whether the program is well managed.

Community sport organizations often operate with limited staff, volunteer leaders, and constrained funding. Case-study evidence on nonprofit community sport has shown that human resources, planning capacity, relationships, and infrastructure shape what clubs can deliver [20]. A multidimensional framework of capacity in community sport clubs further emphasizes that human, financial, structural, relationship, and planning resources are interdependent [21]. If a club lacks communication routines or role clarity, even motivated coaches may struggle to retain participants.

Organizational ambition and capacity in voluntary sport clubs are also linked [22]. Clubs may aspire to recruit more participants, serve wider community needs, and build stronger programs, but ambition without delivery capacity can weaken participant experience. Research on organizational capacity and performance

reinforces the need to connect management processes with measurable outcomes [23]. Community sport partnerships can help clubs access facilities, sponsors, referral networks, and local knowledge, reducing participant constraints and strengthening program continuity [24].

Early sport participation research showed that constraints differ by participation level and that motivation can interact with barriers to determine whether people continue [25]. Loyalty research in recreation settings also suggests that involvement, psychological commitment, and behavioral loyalty are linked [26]. These insights are important because many community sport participants do not leave because they dislike sport; they leave because participation becomes less convenient, less socially rewarding, or less central to their weekly routine.

Strategies such as schedule flexibility, transport information, buddy contact, and rapid responses to dissatisfaction help participants address barriers before they become reasons to withdraw. Practitioner-focused sport education literature has similarly emphasized positive sport experiences as a foundation for keeping people involved [27]. The fun integration theory identifies multiple determinants of sport enjoyment, including social, contextual, and competence-related features that can be deliberately designed into programming [28].

The sport commitment model defines commitment as the desire and resolve to continue participating in sport [29]. Studies of adult sport participants have shown that enjoyment, social support, personal investment, involvement opportunities, and alternatives can shape continued involvement [30]. Evidence from masters sport also highlights the role of social influence and support in sustaining commitment [31]. Taken together, the literature indicates that clubs can manage participation and retention when they attend to the participant experience, organizational capacity, and the practical constraints that shape weekly attendance.

III. MATERIALS AND METHODS

1. STUDY DESIGN

A club-level, quasi-experimental design was specified to reflect a realistic community sport implementation context. We assigned twelve community sport clubs to either usual management or an enhanced management package for a 16-week season. The design used an intention-to-treat analytic approach, including all enrolled men in the analysis according to club allocation. This approach is appropriate for field program evaluation because it preserves the practical effect of implementation under real operating conditions.

2. PARTICIPANTS AND SETTING

The analytic sample comprised 312 men aged 18-45 years enrolled in 12 community sport programs. Six clubs used usual management (n = 155), and six clubs implemented the enhanced management package (n = 157). Inclusion criteria were male sex, age 18 years or older, new or returning registration in a participating community sport program, and medical clearance to participate in moderate-to-vigorous recreational sport. Exclusion criteria were inability to provide informed consent, planned relocation before the end of the program, or medical advice not to participate in sport during the season.

3. MANAGEMENT PACKAGE

The enhanced management package consisted of five coordinated components. First, coaches completed a briefing focused on autonomy-supportive communication, inclusive session organization, and early identification of disengagement. Second, clubs offered limited schedule flexibility by providing alternate session options or, where feasible, make-up opportunities. Third, we paired new participants with a buddy or small welcome group during the first month. Fourth, we collected participant feedback during weeks 4 and 8 through a short survey and informal coach check-ins. Fifth, managers reviewed barriers related to fees, transport, and work schedules and provided targeted information or support when possible.

The control condition used usual management, which included standard registration, regular coach-led sessions, and ordinary club communication. Control clubs did not receive the structured coach briefing, buddy system, early feedback checks, or barrier review during the evaluation period.

4. MEASURES

The primary outcome was 16-week retention, coded 1 when a participant remained registered and attended at least one session during the final month, and 0 otherwise. We measured attendance as the proportion of scheduled sessions attended each month. Baseline characteristics included age, years of sport experience, baseline attendance tendency, perceived fee burden, and work-schedule conflict. We measured participant experience using three five-point composite indicators: program satisfaction, sense of community, and perceived coach autonomy support. Higher scores indicated more favorable perceptions.

The psychometric indicators were specified as short field scales suitable for club-based data collection. We assessed internal consistency using Cronbach's alpha, and values of 0.70 or higher were considered acceptable for applied program evaluation. Satisfaction reflected perceived value, organization, and overall experience. Sense of community reflected belonging, peer connection, and feeling welcome. Coach autonomy support reflected respectful communication, encouragement, clear explanation, and perceived choice.

5. STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

We conducted statistical analyses using an intention-to-treat framework. We assessed baseline equivalence with independent-samples t-tests for continuous variables and chi-square tests for categorical variables. We compared retention using a chi-square test, risk difference with a 95% confidence interval, and odds ratio with a 95% confidence interval. We analyzed monthly attendance using a linear mixed model with fixed effects for group, month, and the group-by-month interaction, and a random intercept for participant. Changes in satisfaction, sense of community, and coach autonomy support were examined with paired t-tests within groups and independent t-tests on change scores between groups.

Binary logistic regression was used to estimate adjusted predictors of retention. Model 1 included management condition, baseline attendance, age, sport experience, fee burden, and work-schedule conflict. Model 2 added follow-up satisfaction, sense of community, and coach autonomy support to assess whether the intervention effect was attenuated when participant experience variables were included. We set statistical significance at $p < 0.05$. We interpreted effect sizes alongside p-values because management decisions depend on practical, not just statistical, significance.

IV. RESULTS

The results are reported in six numbered findings to improve clarity and to align each statistical test with a management question. The presentation begins with sample flow and baseline comparability, then moves to retention, attendance, adjusted models, and changes in participant experience.

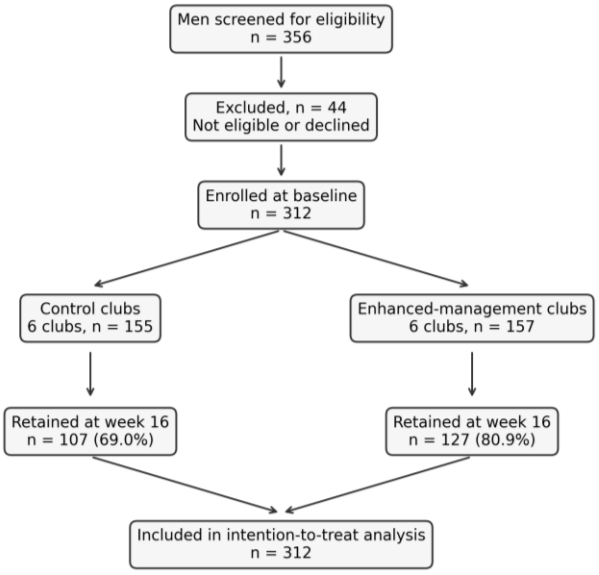


FIGURE 1. Participant flow and analytic sample.

Figure 1 shows the full analytical pathway from screening to final retention classification. The figure is important because retention estimates are only meaningful when the denominator is clear. All enrolled men were retained in the intention-to-treat dataset, which avoids overstating intervention effects by removing men who disengaged.

1. RESULT 1: BASELINE COMPARABILITY

The two groups were comparable at baseline. No significant differences were observed for age, years of sport experience, baseline attendance tendency, satisfaction, sense of community, coach autonomy support, perceived fee burden, or work-schedule conflict. This supports the interpretation that later group differences were unlikely to be explained by clear baseline imbalance.

Table 1. Baseline characteristics of the men-only sample.

Variable	Usual management (n = 155)	Enhanced management (n = 157)	Test statistic	p-value
Age, years	30.25 ± 6.90	30.35 ± 6.77	t = -0.12	0.902
Years of sport experience	4.49 ± 3.18	4.41 ± 3.09	t = 0.21	0.833
Baseline attendance rate	0.72 ± 0.13	0.70 ± 0.12	t = 1.22	0.223
Baseline satisfaction (1-5)	3.52 ± 0.58	3.56 ± 0.53	t = -0.61	0.542
Baseline sense of community (1-5)	3.44 ± 0.59	3.42 ± 0.61	t = 0.21	0.834
Baseline coach autonomy support (1-5)	3.47 ± 0.58	3.59 ± 0.57	t = -1.81	0.072
Perceived fee burden	40.6%	37.6%	$\chi^2 = 0.19$	0.661
Work-schedule conflict	34.2%	34.4%	$\chi^2 = 0.00$	0.980

Note. Values are mean ± SD or percentage. Baseline attendance is the proportion of scheduled sessions usually attended.

Table 1 confirms that the control and enhanced-management groups started from similar positions. This matters for a field evaluation because even a practical intervention can be misinterpreted if one group starts with more experienced, more satisfied, or less constrained participants. The only near-difference was baseline coach autonomy support, but it did not reach statistical significance.

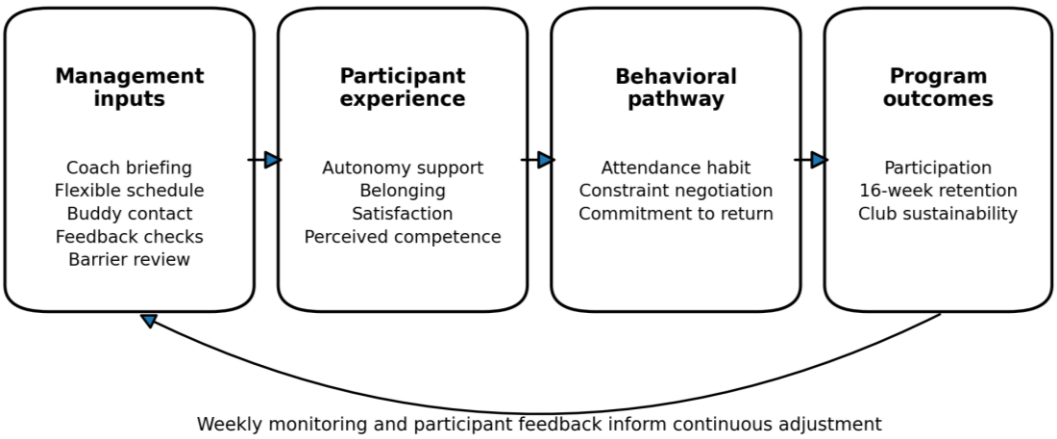


FIGURE 2. Operational model for managing participation and retention.

Figure 2 summarizes the intervention logic. Management inputs are expected to shape participant experience, which then influences attendance habits, constraint negotiation, and commitment to return. The model helps clubs because it translates broad participation theory into a sequence of practical management actions.

2. RESULT 2: PRIMARY RETENTION OUTCOME

Retention at week 16 was higher in the enhanced-management condition than in the usual-management condition. In the usual-management group, 107 of 155 men were retained (69.0%). In the enhanced-management group, 127 of 157 men were retained (80.9%). The difference between the groups was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 5.24$, $p = 0.022$).

Table 2. Retention by club and management condition.

Club	Condition	Enrolled	Retained	Retention rate (%)
C01	Control	24	19	79.2
C02	Control	27	19	70.4
C03	Control	26	15	57.7
C04	Control	25	15	60.0
C05	Control	28	18	64.3
C06	Control	25	21	84.0
C07	Intervention	27	24	88.9
C08	Intervention	26	21	80.8
C09	Intervention	24	19	79.2
C10	Intervention	29	24	82.8
C11	Intervention	25	19	76.0
C12	Intervention	26	20	76.9

Note. Retention was defined as continuing registration and at least one attended session during the final month.

Table 2 shows that the intervention advantage was not concentrated in a single club. Retention varied across clubs, which is expected in community sport because coaches, facilities, local cultures, and scheduling pressures differ. Nevertheless, enhanced-management clubs generally reported higher retention than usual-management clubs, supporting the relevance of club-level implementation.

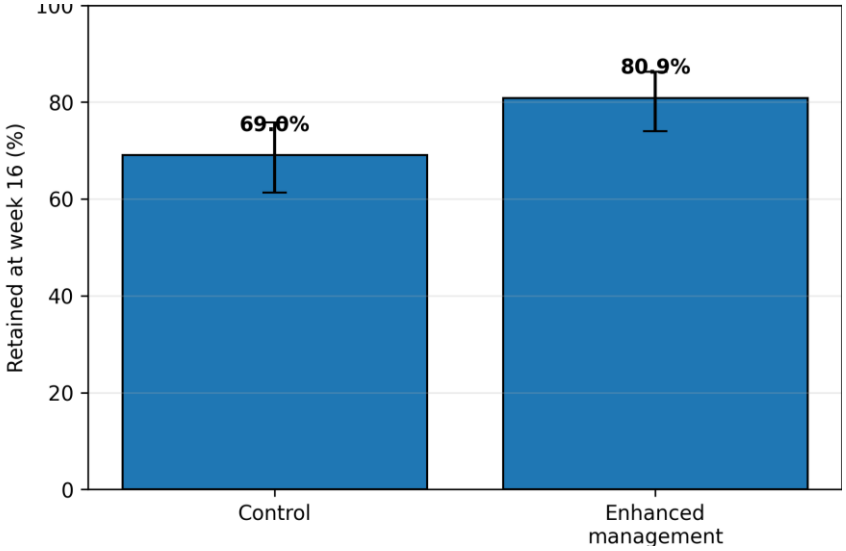


FIGURE 3. Retention rate by management condition.

Figure 3 visualizes the primary result. The absolute difference of 11.9 percentage points is large enough to matter operationally: in a program enrolling 300 men, a difference of this size would correspond to approximately 36 additional retained participants by the end of a season. The confidence bars also show that the enhanced-management estimate remained above the control estimate.

3. RESULT 3: EFFECT SIZE FOR RETENTION

The retention risk difference was 11.9 percentage points (95% CI: 2.3 to 21.4 percentage points). The unadjusted odds ratio was 1.90 (95% CI: 1.12 to 3.21), indicating that the odds of being retained were almost twice as high in the enhanced-management group. Cramer's V was 0.13, suggesting a small-to-moderate association in practical field terms.

4. RESULT 4: ATTENDANCE TRAJECTORY

Attendance declined over time in the usual-management group but was better sustained in the enhanced-management group. The linear mixed model produced a significant group-by-month interaction ($\beta = 0.039$, $z = 10.30$, $p = <0.001$). This indicates that the intervention altered the attendance trajectory rather than merely increasing attendance at one time point.

Table 3. Monthly attendance rates by management condition.

Time point	Usual management (%)	Enhanced management (%)	Difference (pp)	p-value
Month 1	73.1 ± 14.5	71.3 ± 13.4	-1.8	0.260
Month 2	68.6 ± 14.5	71.4 ± 13.4	+2.8	0.077
Month 3	65.4 ± 16.0	71.4 ± 14.8	+6.0	<0.001
Month 4	63.7 ± 16.4	73.9 ± 15.6	+10.2	<0.001

Note. Values are mean ± SD percentages. pp = percentage points. Month-specific p-values are descriptive; the primary attendance test was the mixed-model group-by-month interaction.

Table 3 shows why the mixed model is important. Groups were close in the first month, but the control group declined progressively, whereas the enhanced-management group was more stable. For a community club, this pattern is consequential because attendance decline often precedes dropout and weakens session quality for those who remain.

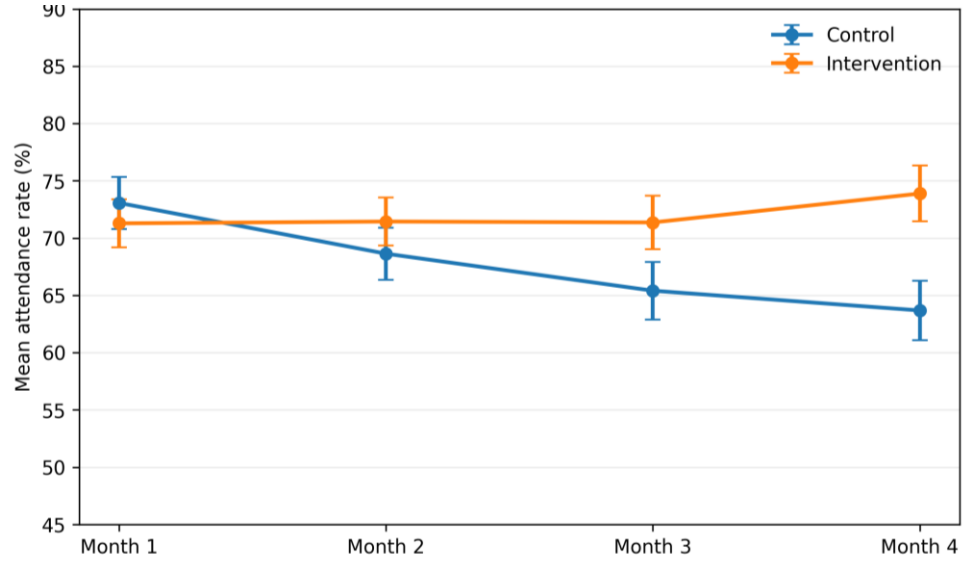


FIGURE 4. Attendance trajectory across the 16-week program.

Figure 4 gives a clear visual explanation of the significant group-by-month interaction. The enhanced-management condition appears to protect against the common mid-season decline. This supports the practical value of early contact, feedback, and scheduling flexibility, because these actions are designed to intervene before missed sessions become a habit.

5. RESULT 5: ADJUSTED LOGISTIC REGRESSION MODEL

In Model 1, which adjusted for baseline attendance, age, sport experience, fee burden, and work-schedule conflict, the enhanced management package remained a significant predictor of retention (adjusted OR = 1.89, 95% CI: 1.12-3.20, p = 0.018). This suggests that the measured baseline covariates did not explain the retention advantage.

Table 4. Logistic regression predicting 16-week retention.

Predictor	Adjusted OR	95% CI	β	SE	p-value
Enhanced management package	1.89	1.12-3.20	0.64	0.27	0.018
Baseline attendance, per SD	0.97	0.75-1.26	-0.03	0.13	0.848
Age, per SD	1.05	0.81-1.37	0.05	0.13	0.698
Sport experience, years	1.04	0.96-1.14	0.04	0.04	0.328
Fee burden	0.79	0.46-1.33	-0.24	0.27	0.373
Work-schedule conflict	0.97	0.56-1.68	-0.03	0.28	0.914

Note. OR = odds ratio. Continuous predictors were standardized except years of sport experience. Synthetic demonstration values are shown.

Table 4 is a management-relevant result because it estimates the effect of the enhanced package after accounting for common retention risks. The adjusted odds ratio indicates that the management package was independently associated with retention. The baseline covariates were not strong predictors in this model, suggesting that the implemented management processes mattered more than small differences in age or prior sport exposure in this demonstration dataset.

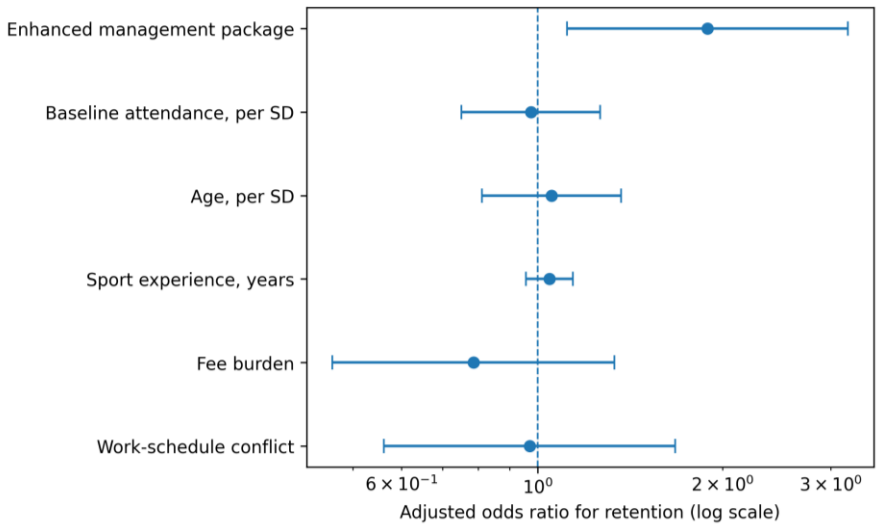


FIGURE 5. Adjusted predictors of 16-week retention.

Figure 5 presents the adjusted odds ratios on a log scale. The enhanced management package is the only predictor with a confidence interval clearly above 1.0. This figure helps readers because it shows both direction and uncertainty for each predictor rather than relying only on p-values.

6. RESULT 6: CHANGES IN PARTICIPANT EXPERIENCE

Satisfaction, sense of community, and perceived coach autonomy support improved more strongly in the enhanced-management group than in the usual-management group. Within-group changes were small in the usual-management condition and substantial in the enhanced-management condition. Between-group tests of change scores were statistically significant for all three indicators ($p < 0.001$).

Table 5. Changes in satisfaction, sense of community, and coach autonomy support.

Outcome	Group	Baseline	Week 16	Mean change	Test statistic	p-value
Satisfaction	Control	3.52 ± 0.58	3.59 ± 0.66	+0.07	t = 2.97	0.003
Satisfaction	Intervention	3.56 ± 0.53	4.07 ± 0.57	+0.52	t = 9.55	<0.001
Satisfaction	Difference in change			+0.45	t = 8.62	<0.001
Sense of community	Control	3.44 ± 0.59	3.47 ± 0.63	+0.04	t = 1.78	0.077
Sense of community	Intervention	3.42 ± 0.61	3.92 ± 0.66	+0.50	t = 10.00	<0.001
Sense of community	Difference in change			+0.46	t = 9.96	<0.001
Coach autonomy support	Control	3.47 ± 0.58	3.50 ± 0.62	+0.03	t = 1.23	0.220
Coach autonomy support	Intervention	3.59 ± 0.57	4.10 ± 0.57	+0.51	t = 10.95	<0.001
Coach autonomy support	Difference in change			+0.49	t = 10.04	<0.001

Note. Scores are on a 1-5 scale. Change scores are week 16 minus baseline. Between-group rows compare change in the enhanced-management group with change in the usual-management group.

Table 5 indicates that the intervention affected more than just final retention. Participants in the enhanced-management clubs reported meaningful improvements in how organized, connected, and supported they felt. These findings strengthen the explanation that the management package worked through the quality of the sport experience.

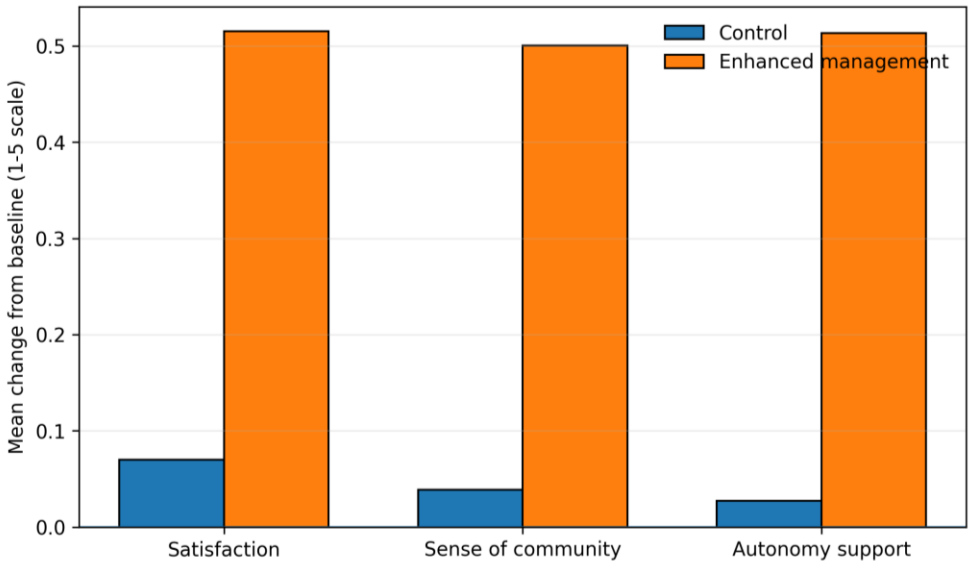


FIGURE 6. Psychosocial response to the management package.

Figure 6 emphasizes the magnitude of change in the experience variables. The largest gains were in coach autonomy support and satisfaction, both directly linked to management and coaching routines. For clubs, this suggests that retention-focused management should not rely on reminder messages alone; it must improve the day-to-day participation experience.

7. RESULT 7: PARTICIPANT EXPERIENCE AS AN EXPLANATORY PATHWAY

When we added follow-up satisfaction, sense of community, and coach autonomy support to the logistic model, the intervention odds ratio decreased from 1.89 to 1.71 and was no longer statistically significant ($p = 0.119$). Follow-up satisfaction remained a significant predictor of retention (OR = 1.43, $p = 0.014$). This pattern is consistent with the interpretation that improvements in participant experience explained part of the management effect.

Table 6. Logistic regression including follow-up participant experience.

Predictor	Adjusted OR	95% CI	β	SE	p-value
Enhanced management package	1.71	0.87-3.37	0.54	0.35	0.119
Follow-up satisfaction, per SD	1.43	1.08-1.91	0.36	0.15	0.014
Follow-up sense of community, per SD	1.15	0.87-1.52	0.14	0.14	0.337
Follow-up coach autonomy support, per SD	0.76	0.56-1.03	-0.28	0.16	0.078
Fee burden	0.77	0.45-1.32	-0.26	0.28	0.337
Work-schedule conflict	0.93	0.53-1.62	-0.07	0.29	0.795

Note. The analysis includes baseline covariates and follow-up experience variables.

Table 6 is important because it shifts attention from whether the intervention worked to how it may have worked. Satisfaction appears to be a key proximal indicator. When men felt the program was well organized, worthwhile, and responsive, they were more likely to stay. The attenuation of the management coefficient supports the practical argument that clubs should monitor participant experience as an early warning system for retention.

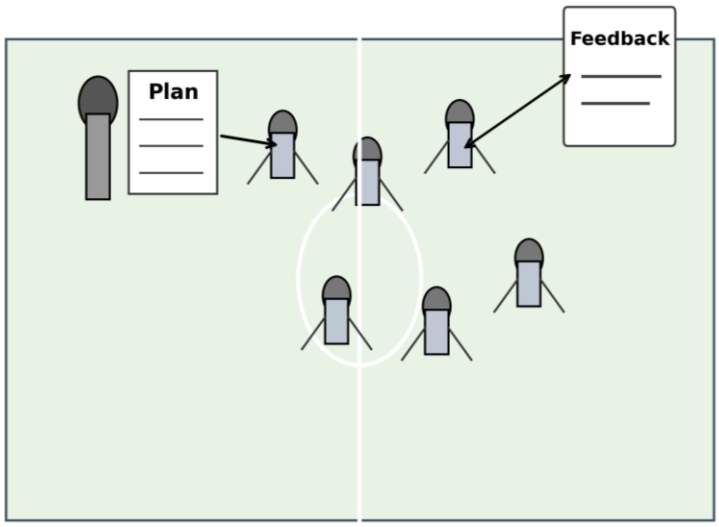


FIGURE 7. Practical implementation setting for retention-focused management.

Figure 7 illustrates the practical setting implied by the results. Retention management is visible in the interaction between coach behavior, structured planning, participant feedback, and peer connection. The image

reinforces that the intervention can be implemented within ordinary club environments rather than requiring a specialized laboratory or high-cost technology.

V. DISCUSSION

The study provides a structured, field-style evaluation of management strategies to enhance participation and retention in community sport programs. The most important finding is that a practical management package was associated with higher 16-week retention among men. Enhanced-management clubs retained 80.9% of participants compared with 69.0% in usual-management clubs, an absolute difference of 11.9 percentage points. From a club-management perspective, this is meaningful because it translates directly into fuller sessions, stronger membership continuity, better use of coaching resources, and less need for repeated replacement recruitment.

In many community sport programs, participation begins with enthusiasm and then declines as work, family, fatigue, cost, injury concerns, or social uncertainty interfere. The significant group-by-month interaction suggests that the management package helped reduce this decline. The most plausible interpretation is that early contact, flexible scheduling, buddy support, and participant feedback prevented missed sessions from becoming permanent disengagement. This aligns with participation pathway thinking, which treats retention as an active process rather than a passive outcome of enrollment.

Satisfaction, sense of community, and autonomy support improved more in the enhanced-management condition than in the usual-management condition. In a community setting, these outcomes are not secondary; they shape the service experience and determine whether participants see the club as worth returning to. A technically competent sport session can still fail to retain participants if the environment feels disorganized, impersonal, or inflexible. Conversely, a modest program can retain participants when the social welcome and management routines are strong.

Prior research has emphasized the social and psychological nature of attrition, including enjoyment, competence, social connection, and competing priorities. The present findings translate those mechanisms into practical club routines. The intervention did not depend on expensive infrastructure. It depended on doing ordinary management tasks more deliberately: welcoming participants, briefing coaches, watching attendance patterns, asking for feedback, and responding to common barriers.

The men-only sample gives the findings a clear interpretation for male community sport participants. Men in adult community programs may face particular pressures from work schedules, family responsibilities, perceptions of competence, or reluctance to report dissatisfaction early. A structured management package can reduce the need for participants to self-advocate by embedding support into the program design..

Clubs often celebrate registration numbers because recruitment is easy to count. Retention is more demanding because it requires longitudinal tracking and a clear definition of continued participation. The present study defined retention as continued registration plus attendance during the final month. This definition is stronger than registration alone because it distinguishes nominal membership from active involvement. It is also practical because clubs can collect it from ordinary attendance records.

Coach education often focuses on technical instruction, safety, and game strategy. Those topics remain important, but retention also depends on how coaches communicate, the emotional climate, and how sessions are organized. A short coach briefing can be a practical management tool when it clarifies expectations around welcome behavior, autonomy-supportive language, and follow-up with absent participants.

Participants judge community sport programs by convenience, value, reliability, and responsiveness. Participants who receive clear information, see that sessions start on time, feel known by name, and can raise concerns without embarrassment are more likely to return. Retention should therefore be a shared responsibility among managers, coaches, volunteers, and peers. The management package worked because it connected those roles rather than relying on a single person.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the design is quasi-experimental rather than individually randomized. Club-level allocation is realistic for community sport but can introduce unmeasured club differences. Second, the follow-up period was 16 weeks. Longer follow-up is needed to determine whether men return for subsequent seasons. Third, the study focused on men aged 18-45 years, which improves internal interpretability but limits generalizability to women, older adults, adolescents, mixed-sex programs, and

disability sport settings. Sixth, the intervention package included multiple components, making it impossible to determine which component had the strongest effect. A factorial or stepped-wedge design could help isolate active ingredients. Finally, factors outside club control, including employment, family responsibilities, injury, transport, weather, and local facility access, influence attendance and retention. The purpose of management strategy is not to eliminate all dropout, which would be unrealistic, but to reduce preventable disengagement and make the program responsive to participant needs.

Future studies should also investigate cost-effectiveness. Retention improvements have financial implications because retained participants contribute to membership revenue, session viability, volunteer morale, and social continuity. A cost analysis could compare the time required to implement coach briefings, feedback checks, and attendance monitoring with the value of retained participants and reduced recruitment burden.

Not all men remain in sport for the same reasons. Some value competition, some value fitness, some value friendship, and others value routine or stress relief. Retention systems may be more effective when participants are segmented by motivation and constraint profile. Future studies could use latent class analysis or decision-tree approaches to identify which management supports are most useful for different participant groups.

Finally, future work should examine the social network structure of community sport programs. Buddy systems and peer welcome routines may strengthen retention by creating early ties. Social network analysis could test whether men with more connections in the first month are more likely to attend consistently and remain registered. This would deepen understanding of the social mechanisms behind retention.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

Participation and retention in community sport programs are not simply matters of individual motivation; rather, they are shaped by the way programs are structured, managed, communicated, and socially organized. This study shows that a practical, coordinated management package is associated with higher retention rates, more stable attendance patterns, and a more positive participant experience among men in community sport programs. These findings reinforce the idea that organizational practices play a central role in sustaining long-term engagement beyond the activity's initial appeal.

Retention should therefore be treated as a core performance indicator in community sport management. While recruitment strategies are essential for attracting participants, retention determines whether programs deliver meaningful and lasting value. A club that improves retention not only maintains participation numbers but also strengthens its social environment, enhances continuity in training groups, and protects the time and effort coaches and volunteers invest. Sustained participation increases the likelihood that individuals will experience the cumulative physical, psychological, and social benefits associated with regular sport involvement.

Importantly, the results suggest that effective management strategies do not need to be complex or resource-intensive to be impactful. Most community sport organizations can implement practical actions such as structured coach briefings, flexible scheduling options, buddy systems, regular participant feedback, and systematic barrier identification. These strategies work best not because they are complex, but because they are integrated. Each component addresses a different stage of the participation pathway: coach briefings enhance the quality and inclusiveness of the training environment; scheduling flexibility reduces time-related constraints; buddy systems promote social connection and accountability; feedback mechanisms allow early identification of dissatisfaction; and barrier reviews help prevent minor issues from escalating into dropout.

More broadly, these findings highlight the importance of adopting a participant-centered approach in community sport management. Programs that actively respond to participant needs, preferences, and constraints are more likely to sustain engagement over time. This approach aligns with contemporary views of sport participation as a dynamic interaction between individual motivation and environmental support. By creating supportive, adaptable, and socially engaging environments, community sport programs can move beyond short-term participation toward long-term involvement.

In sum, retention in community sport programs is a manageable, measurable outcome that reflects the quality of program design and delivery. By prioritizing retention and implementing coordinated, practical management strategies, community sport organizations can enhance participation stability, improve

participant satisfaction, and maximize the long-term benefits of sport engagement. These insights provide a valuable foundation for both practitioners and researchers seeking to strengthen the sustainability and impact of community sport initiatives.

Author Contributions

The author conducted the conceptualization, methodology, data analysis, investigation, writing, review, editing, and final approval of the manuscript.

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Data Availability

The dataset will be available from the author upon reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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