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SPORT SPECIALIZATION

Investigating the Common Myths Leading Parents to Enroll Their Children in Early Sport Specialization

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Abstract

An estimated 60 million children and adolescents between the ages of 6 and 18 participate in some form of organized athletics in the United States. Unfortunately, the youth sport landscape has changed such that organizations and coaches inform parents and athletes that early sport specialization (ESS) is an essential requirement for elite performance. Despite evidence that opposes this limited track, parents continue to overlook the potential negative consequences. Although the media commonly portrays ESS as the only pathway to success, research of Olympians and elite athletes in team sports indicates otherwise. To date, there has been ongoing research that examines the outcomes of ESS on athletes, but a large portion focuses solely on athlete burnout and injuries from specializing too early. On the contrary, there has been less attention toward the influences and interactions of programs and coaches on and with parents*, who greatly influence their child's sporting experience. Parents place trust in programs and coaches but are often misled by common myths. This article summarizes the common myths that lead parents to enroll their children in ESS. By having awareness of these three common myths, parents can become better informed on the perceived requirement of ESS for elite performance in youth sport.*

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Sport continues to be a popular activity among children and adolescents. An estimated 60 million children and adolescents between the ages of 6 and 18 participate in some form of organized athletics in the United States (Jones et al., 2018). Youth sport should provide children and adolescents a positive environment in which they can develop in physical, cognitive, and social aspects (Gould & Carson, 2004). In addition, youth sport involvement has been shown to influence health-related outcomes (e.g., cardiovascular fitness, muscle strength, and endurance; Pate et al., 2000) while promoting opportunities for leadership, teamwork, and positive social relationships (Côté & Hay, 2002; Cotterill & Fransen, 2016; McEwan & Beauchamp, 2014). Unfortunately, youth sport has shifted toward a privatized and ultracompetitive environment in which more parents and athletes believe that specializing early in a single sport is an essential requirement for elite performance.

Early sport specialization (ESS) has been defined as participation in an intensive organized sport for greater than 8 months/year at the exclusion of other sports, for children aged 12 years or younger (LaPrade et al., 2016). Despite evidence that opposes this limited track, parents continue to overlook the potential detriments in hope that their children achieve their athletic potential and destiny (Smith, 2015). The media commonly portrays ESS as the only pathway to success, highlighting famous athletes who were early sport specializers such as Tiger Woods and Venus and Serena Williams. Yet in a survey of 1,720 U.S. Olympians who competed in the 1984–2012 Summer and Winter Olympic Games, the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Committee reported that these Olympians averaged three sports until 14 years of age with an average of 2.2 sports/year at ages 15 to 18 (Riewald & Snyder, 2014). These findings are similarly shared in studies of team sports such as soccer (Ford et al., 2009; Haugaasen et al., 2014), basketball (Baker et al., 2003; Leite & Sampaio, 2012), volleyball (Coutinho et al., 2014), ice hockey (Soberlak & Côté, 2003), and baseball (Hill, 1993). Influencing factors such as the 10,000-hour or 10-year rule, success stories of certain sport programs or coaches, and the pursuit of a collegiate scholarship or professional contract have seemingly become a requirement within youth sport for parents.

For the past two decades, ongoing ESS research has examined the outcomes on athletes. The results of these studies have demonstrated that athletes are at an increased risk of burnout and overuse injuries (Bell et al., 2018; Bell et al., 2016; Myer et al., 2015). Of interest, there has been considerably less attention toward the influences and interactions of programs and coaches on and with parents. From a parental perspective, research has confirmed that parents can have a positive or negative influence on a child's sporting experience (Dorsch et al., 2015; Holt & Knight, 2014). As Knight et al. (2016) indicated, parents' involvement in their child's sport experience can be influenced by multiple aspects including the current context, other adults (e.g., parents and coaches), their own behavior, past experiences and knowledge of the sport, and their goals and expectations for their child. Most parents believe that programs and coaches are considering their child's best interests rather than exploiting their child for a competitive advantage when ESS is touted as the recommended method in the development of an athlete's potential (Popkin et al., 2019). Parents continue to be conflicted and misled by myths that suggest ESS is required for elite performance. This article summarizes the common myths that lead parents to enroll their children in ESS. By having awareness of these three common myths, parents can become better informed on the perceived requirement of ESS for elite performance in youth sport.

Myth 1: The Athlete Will Acquire More Sport Skills

Many parents believe that their child will become more skilled when specializing early in one sport. The notion of deliberate practice wherein practice is highly structured with no immediate rewards and focuses on improving performance over inherent enjoyment is often a perceived requirement (Ericsson et al., 1993). The sport community knows this as the 10,000-hour or 10-year rule, which says the child must deliberately practice for 10,000 hours or 10 years to achieve elite performance. In contrast, Côté et al. (2007) suggested deliberate play as a preferred method; in this method, play is intrinsically motivating and designed to maximize fun and enjoyment for children aged 6 to 13 years. Additional methods of youth sport participation include (a) play practice (i.e., adult-designed

instruction that emphasizes fun and games), (b) spontaneous practice (i.e., child-led sport skill development), or (c) organized competition (i.e., adult-managed competition that requires effort and focus; Côté et al., 2013). Although ESS and these methods can coexist (i.e., one sport that is intrinsically motivating at the exclusion of others), deliberate play should occur over a wide range of sports and activities, otherwise known as sport sampling (Côté, 1999). By sport sampling, children have more opportunities to learn a variety of fundamental motor skills and movement patterns that translate across many sports such as throwing or kicking a ball (Goodway & Robinson, 2015). Due to the encouragement of intrinsic motivation with an increase in time on task and creativity, children who sport sample and diversify are more likely to develop sport skills.

However, numerous programs and coaches limit athletes' sport participation to one sport. Required year-round training has become the norm—where once optional off-season activities were common—and has transitioned to become a mandatory component within an athlete's registration fee. Programs and coaches advocate for the exclusion of other sports, year-round training, and commitment to parents by luring them toward the idea that this method will aid their children's skill development, providing early specializers with the opportunity get ahead of their peers (Jayanthi et al., 2013). Moreover, there is the threat that if young athletes do not commit to this method, they will fall behind and be unable to catch up. Yet athlete development models such as the Developmental Model of Sport Participation (DMSP; Côté & Fraser-Thomas, 2007) have been introduced. The DMSP identifies and focuses on the stages and various pathways that an athlete can take toward elite performance. It describes three pathways that children can take through youth sport: (1) early sampling of recreational sport through deliberate play; (2) early sampling of sport through deliberate play, then transitioning to deliberate practice, known as later specialization; and (3) ESS through deliberate practice (Côté & Fraser-Thomas, 2007). These pathways can lead children toward elite performance. For sport skill development, the third trajectory is only required for young athletes who participate in sports in which peak performance is prepubertal such as gymnastics or figure skating (Anderson & Mayo, 2015).

The first myth that the athlete will acquire more sport skills by being an early sport specializer has been effectively challenged. The 10,000-hour or 10-year rule was formulated based upon the results of musicians and chess players' use of deliberate practice but has since become a perceived necessity for athletes in youth sport. Thus, programs and coaches mandate year-round commitment and training, misguiding parents into believing that their child is at risk of falling behind. However, athlete development models have demonstrated that there are multiple pathways toward elite performance unless the athlete is participating in a sport in which peak performance must occur before puberty. Sport diversification through deliberate play is the recommended method for athletes to best acquire a vast range of transferable sport skills.

Myth 2: The Athlete Will Become More Prepared for Adulthood

Often, parents are sold the idea that youth sport experiences are crucial to the development of life-related skills (e.g., teamwork, adversity, dealing with authority) that will better prepare their children to become more successful in adulthood (Etnier, 2020). Coakley (2015) defined this misconception as the Great Sport Myth, which says "the purity and goodness of sport is transmitted to those who play or consume it; and that sport inevitably leads to individual development" (p. 404). Parents frequently believe this notion and are informed that ESS will place their children within a competitive environment that toughens them up and prepares them best for the "real world." However, children are not miniature adults and should not be treated as such, even in sport. Although some athletes benefit from an uber-competitive setting, many are at risk of suffering short-term burnout and long-term psychological problems. A common issue of ESS is a disruption of the development of positive social and peer relationships due to the child's perceived competence being negatively impacted. Athletes who specialize early tend to only use limited sources (e.g., peer comparison, performance outcomes, and coach feedback) to evaluate themselves (Keegan et al., 2010). Further, these athletes tend to struggle with identity foreclosure, a process of finding their sense of self and feeling limited due to their involvement in one sport from a young age (Coakley, 2010).

An area of significance that parents may overlook is structure of developmental variables (e.g., physical, motor, cognitive, psychosocial) that sport organizations and coaches use within the sport environment. Children, regardless of gender, age, or level of competitive play, have shared similar reasons for participation in youth sport (Visek et al., 2019; Weiss & Williams, 2004). Therefore, if the environment is designed so the athlete is intrinsically motivated, the negative developmental outcomes may be not as severe (Horn, 2015). A key aspect in the design of a developmentally appropriate environment is the use of theory that is aligned throughout the curriculum and instruction (Allan et al., 2018). An example of a theory that can be implemented to increase athletes' intrinsic motivation is the self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000). The SDT outlines three fundamental needs for the athlete's motivation to occur: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Standage et al., 2005). Autonomy represents the need for control and choice in actions, competence is the need for effectiveness and mastery in the environment, and relatedness refers to the need for a sense of belonging and connectedness with others (Ryan & Deci, 2017). If these needs of the athlete are met in the environment designed by the coach, the athletes will become intrinsically motivated to participate (Vasconcellos et al., 2019). Unfortunately, many sport programs and curriculums are not grounded in theory. This leads coaches to design an environment that solely focuses on winning and it thus results in negative psychological consequences.

The second myth that the athlete will become more prepared for adulthood by being an early sport specializer has been discredited (Etnier, 2020). Parents are persuaded into the belief that ESS is the best method to prepare their children for the adversity that lies ahead. Instead, an athlete's inability to establish social and peer relationships, a decrease in their perceived competence, and a lack of identity foreclosure are possible long-term risks. The environment must be structured in a developmentally appropriate way that intrinsically motivates athletes. In doing so, a program that is theoretically grounded (e.g., SDT) in its curriculum and instruction can design an environment that limits the negative psychological consequences.

Myth 3: The Athlete Will Receive Better Coaches

Frequently, parents are advised that their child will become privy to better coaches at programs that advertise being elite and require year-round commitment from athletes. These programs regularly state that their coaches are superior to those of other teams, often offering their services at extreme costs due to high winning percentages or track records of coaching athletes now in college and/or professional sport. As Hastie (2015) noted, to better comprehend the quality of pedagogy being offered, one needs to consider the knowledge of these coaches and look beyond only a coach's win–loss record and success stories. According to Côté and Gilbert's (2009) definition of coaching effectiveness, there are three types of knowledge of an effective coach: professional knowledge (a coach's sport-specific physical, technical, and tactical skills), interpersonal knowledge (a coach's ability to develop and manage relationships with their athletes), and intrapersonal knowledge (a coach's ability to reflect and examine their own methods and practice). Although these coaches can demonstrate and provide frequent feedback toward the development of sport-specific physical, technical, or tactical skills, this is not enough for them to be effective coaches. An effective coach designs a developmentally appropriate environment in which athletes receive relevant knowledge, identifies teachable moments, and fosters intrinsic motivation while making the experience enjoyable for all athletes (Etnier, 2020).

In addition to gaining a clearer understanding of all the knowledge that constructs coaching effectiveness, one needs to examine the concept of a coach's pedagogical content knowledge. Even though a coach's playing experience and professional knowledge of their sport is often revered, the coach's integration of content knowledge, their understanding of pedagogy, and their awareness of their athlete's abilities are equally important (Ward, 2009). In particular, for a coach to structure a training plan that reflects content progression, the sequencing of instructional learning tasks toward a set outcome is a critical skill (Rink, 1979, 2014). By extending (increasing the complexity of the task), refining (focusing on a particular aspect of performance), and applying (performance via a game or an assessment), a coach adjusts the difficulty of the task based upon

the specific needs of the athlete (Rink, 1979). Further, in a study that described athletes' experiences of poor teaching by coaches, Gearity (2012) found that athletes perceived coaches at various competitive levels (e.g., youth to professional) were substandard at providing useful and individualized instruction, were inadequate at managing game tactics, and lacked knowledge to teach effectively. Evidently, there is still low-quality instruction even at the highest levels (Gearity, 2012); coaches lack the pedagogical content knowledge necessary to teach in the most developmentally appropriate way best suited for their athletes.

The third myth that the athlete will receive better coaches by being an early sport specializer has been disputed. ESS is portrayed as an opportunity for athletes to have access to celebrity coaches who will help guide them to elite performance. These coaches are often expensive due to their touted high winning percentages or previous athletes now playing college and/or professional sport. This leads parents to believe that their child will benefit from guaranteed enhanced pedagogy, but low-quality coaching still happens at elite levels. While these coaches may have more professional knowledge, they may not structure learning tasks sequentially, communicate effectively, or adjust to the developmental needs of their athletes, making the experience less enjoyable for all athletes.

Discussion

With numerous programs and coaches suggesting that ESS is the only trajectory required for athletes to achieve collegiate or professional success, parents need to become better informed that there are many pathways that do not involve ESS that their child can take to elite performance. The percentage of athletes who successfully transition from high school sport to college sport and college sport to professional sport is extremely low in most sports (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2019). In reality, young athletes are more likely to receive academic funding for college or university because there is significantly more funding to support academic scholarships than athletic scholarships (Bacon, 2016). Parents want the best for their children, but the child should be in control of their sporting decisions. Because parents have a duty to protect and limit the negative consequences of sport on their children, there are issues

that arise with the practice of ESS (Torres, 2015). The only acceptable reason for a child to partake in ESS is when the sport requires peak performance before puberty; otherwise, sport diversification through sport sampling is recommended. Many athletes who specialize in sport at a young age do not make it to an elite level and suffer from burnout, eventually dropping out of sport altogether (Malina, 2010). Parents and athletes need to become aware of the risks associated with ESS and learn about the multiple pathways toward elite performance.

Youth sport has become an arms race in which organizations and coaches aim to convince parents how much more their program can offer their child than their fellow competitors' program. The pursuit of a collegiate scholarship or professional contract as well as not wanting their child to fall behind other children who partake in ESS is usually enough for parents to sign up their child for ESS, as they presume this is the quickest trajectory toward elite level performance. To date, research has primarily examined ESS with regard to the athletes, focusing on burnout, overuse injuries, and skill development (Baker et al., 2009). There has been less attention toward the influences and interactions of programs and coaches on and with parents who believe their child's best interests are being considered rather than being exploited for a competitive advantage when ESS is the recommended method in the development of an athlete's potential (Popkin et al., 2019). Therefore, the continuation of longitudinal studies that follow parents and their child's sporting experiences from childhood to adulthood across all contexts is recommended and may provide an increased understanding of ESS (Jayanthi et al., 2020; Weiss, 2015). Further, through the usage of athlete development models, studies can track parental decision making and outcomes of their children across various populations along the spectrum of specialization, with an increased focus on the athlete's movement between each stage (Hecimovich, 2004; Jayanthi et al., 2013). Last, a consensus judgment regarding ESS and accountability of organizations from all major stakeholders within youth sport such as the National Basketball Association (DiFiori et al., 2018) would provide parents a resource related to their child's specific sport.

The trend of ESS is likely to continue with parents being misled by common myths due to the perceived benefits of their child

becoming an elite athlete (Smith, 2015). Although research has demonstrated there are multiple pathways to elite performance, parents continue to place trust in the organizations and coaches because these organizations and coaches publicize having the required expertise and knowledge to guide athletes into elite performance. Since the perceived benefits of ESS are repeatedly highlighted, the potential negative consequences of specializing too early are also noteworthy. Parents should remember that young athletes, even the most talented, are still children (Malina, 2010). Children who participate in organized sport at a young age want to have fun and should be immersed in an environment that prioritizes trying hard, being a good sport, and getting playing time (Visek et al., 2015). With events such as the Olympic Games and new success stories in athletics, ESS will continue to surface and be a hot topic of discussion.

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