

Athlete Drop Outs, Sport Specialization, and Sport Diversification: An Argument for Late Specialization In Youth Sport

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Abstract

This paper looks to investigate youth athlete dropout rates, the reasons for youth athlete dropout, and ways to improve youth athlete retention through analysis of preexisting research. It was found that youth athlete dropout rates are alarmingly high. It was also found that coaches and parents are contributing to youth athlete dropout by having unattainable expectations of the children, taking up too much of the children's time, and using ill maintained facilities. Lastly, it was found that the keys to improving youth athlete retention in sport completely revolved on the enjoyment of the children themselves through positive experiences tailored by the coaches.

The talented few are a very visible minority, whereas the overwhelming majority of youth who participate pass under the radar. Unfortunately, it seems that most attention, resources, and commentaries in print and electronic media, focus on the exceptional minority. Youth sport (sport for athletes aged 18 and younger), is a highly visible and valued activity in communities across the nation, a proving ground for children and parents alike. For many, fun sometimes equates to being a better athlete.

The sport experience is assessed in terms of enhanced technical skill development and competitive ranking (Kimberly et. al. 2013). We live in a world of high performance ethic and an increased need for gratification to let us know we are on the right path. With the power of technology at our fingertips, parents, coaches, and athletes have access to a library of information. This information

can be positive in a sense that coaches can connect and continue to raise the bar in terms of athlete development and continuing education. Along with the positive impact on sport, technology has negative effects. Parents and young athletes can see every talented athlete from anywhere around the world on social media. These online prodigies increase the pressures placed on young athletes to show their potential at an early age because opportunity to gain access to the "pipeline" seems to become more elusive with time.

Parents are called to prove their worth because "good parents" invest in their children's future. All of these added pressures push parents to speed up the developmental process, to identify their child's talents early, and mold it into something tangible regardless of the readiness, maturation, or making an autonomous effort to include the child in the decision process. Parents push to specialize their child so that their young athlete can have an advantage on the competition, develop faster, and have an opportunity to reach expert status. Many parents do not take into consideration, the commitment needed when taking this step. Not just physically but cognitively.

Fortunately, there is another approach to athletic development and that is sport diversification. This model suggests the athletes go through a "sampling" period. During the sampling period an athlete would participate in a variety of sports, usually in an unstructured or lightly structured environment. This allows the athlete to have more control in their development and allows them to more naturally find where their talents lie through play.

Although there is a time and place for early specialization, if the athlete is not ready for this step it can lead to numerous potentially negative effects including physical, psychological, and social aspects. For instance,

the risks of early specialization typically include an increased risk of injuries due to overuse, eating disorders, physiological stress, and drop out of sports (Voigt & Hohmann, 2016). Sport diversification provides young athletes more autonomy and the opportunity to grow at their own pace. As a sporting culture, coaches get wrapped up in the rat race to elite performance, but let's press pause and weigh out the options for a moment.

This paper looks to investigate young athlete dropout rates, identify reasons for young athlete dropout, present practical ways for parents and coaches to improve young athlete retention in sport, and provides insight and recommendations when choosing a path of development in youth athletes

Athlete Retention in Youth Sport

Young athletes are dropping out of sports at an alarming rate. This is troublesome for many reasons. As Daniels and Lawton (2003) state, longitudinal research indicates that youth sport participation is in decline, as indicated by sharp decreases in fitness activity participation by youths over the past twenty years. Seemingly, it is becoming more common for youth to develop into sport observers rather than sport participants. This trend is problematic, as youth sport participation has important ties to social involvement, fitness, self-expression and self-esteem development (Coakley, 2017). Conversely, decreased youth sport participation has been linked to a drastic increase in youth obesity.

Fraser-Thomas et al. (2008) stress the importance of youth sport involvement stating that organized sport plays an important role in the development of children and youth. With approximately 35 million children in the United States participating in community, school, or privately run sports programs, the physical and psychosocial benefits of sport involvement are well recognized. Sports can help young people make and maintain lifelong friendships. Sports also introduce young people to the health benefits of physical activity and can sometimes instill lifelong healthy habits in them. For some, sports are even used as outlets for escape from harsh realities. Lastly, sports can present young athletes with proper role models, that may be missing from their lives, in the form of coaches and volunteers.

Dropout Rates

Petlichkoff (1996) stated, "...dropout rates for youth sport programs in North America average 35% in any given year and are most substantial during adolescence." A more current meta-analysis reviewed 12 studies, with durations ranging from one to five years, that reported youth soccer dropout rates. The 12 studies involved 724,036 youth athletes from five different countries with ages ranging from 10 to 18. The analysis found that the average annual dropout rate was 23.9%, with girls

dropping out at an average of 26.8% per year (Mollerlokken et al. 2015). Dilworth (2015), stated that 70% of children cease playing youth sport by the age of 13. Based on the work of Mollerlokken et al. (2015), one in every four young athletes will walk away from their sport each year. This means that on a basketball roster of 20 athletes, five will quit by the end of the season. More dramatically, Petlichkoff's (1996) article puts the figure at one in every three children. To show how impactful that figure is, on a football team of 100 athletes, 35 athletes will quit by the end of the season. Dilworth's figure might be what is most alarming about young athlete dropout. To put that figure into perspective, 70 of the 100 hypothetical youth football players will no longer be playing football by the time they turn 13. That is an alarming figure when considering the alternatives to sport for some youth. The question becomes: why are so many children dropping out of sports?

Reasons for Dropout

There are numerous reasons why young athletes drop out of sports at such high rates. According to Witt and Dangi (2018), there are three main constraints why young athletes drop out of their sport. The first is intrapersonal, the children no longer enjoying the sport, having feelings of physical inadequacy, feeling stressed out, and having negative feelings toward teammates and coaches. The intrapersonal constraints that exist within athletes can be exacerbated by coaches or parents pushing their children to win at any cost, pressuring them to perform at unachievably high levels, and using negative feedback when the children fail to meet their exceedingly high expectations.

The second is interpersonal which can include pressure put on by parents, feelings of lack of ownership in the sport, and reduced time for other appropriate activities. The interpersonal constraints that exist between the children, their parents, their coaches, and teammates are directly impacted by parents and coaches. When parents and coaches put high pressure on the children to perform, take away any control that the children have over the sport, and demand so much of the children's time that they have no time left over for other activities, they create those interpersonal constraints.

The third, and final, constraint is structural. Structural constraints can include the time it takes for practices and travel to games, injuries, financial cost, and lacking facilities. Lastly, structural constraints can be created by parents and coaches through making practices unnecessarily long, pushing the children to injury, demanding high pay-to-play fees, and using ill maintained facilities.

Although none of the constraints may point directly at coaches or parents, but they may be indirectly created or influenced by coaches and parents.

Improving Retention

How can parents and coaches improve the retention of young athletes in sports? Before that question can be answered, there needs to be a better understanding of why those who continue to play sports, do so. The reasons why children join and stay involved in sports clubs include family influence, wanting to continue early experiences in sport, the time, effort, enjoyment, energy and resources that would be lost if one withdrew from the sport, social aspects and a sense of belonging and the opportunity to develop new friendships and enrich existing friendships.

Lin et al. (2016) interviewed young swimmers' parents from three different clubs about their children's experiences. Throughout the interviews, parents emphasized the need for children to enjoy competitive swimming in order for them to find camaraderie and a consequent sense of belonging. They (the parents) believed this was driven particularly by the ways that coaches treated children, which built positive group morale and a commitment to the club. One mother said, "[The coaches] were so into the kids, and they were so into making it fun for the kids. ... They knew all the kids' names. They were excited to see them. They were really fun and goofy. ... My daughter wanted to go every day. She didn't want to miss a day of swimming, and it wasn't competitive." From the work of Lin et al. it appears that one of the keys to maintaining young athlete retention in sport is contingent on coaches' ensuring the children's enjoyment by showing them that they care, learning their names, having fun, being goofy, being positive, and not solely focusing on competition

Specialization vs Diversification

Early specialization is an approach to athletic development that emphasizes focused training in a single sport on a year round basis. This approach is based off the idea of the "10,000 hour rule" of deliberate practice first suggested by Ericsson, et al. (1993) in the article "*The Role of Deliberate Practice in the Acquisition of Expert Performance*." Ericsson et al. proposed the idea that explains expert performance in terms of acquired characteristics resulting from extended deliberate practice over the course of time. Gladwell (2008) also explained in his book *Outliers*, "ten thousand hours is the magic number of greatness." He uses examples like Bill Gates, who started coding as a teen and built Microsoft, and the Beatles, who played eight hour gigs in German clubs long before coming to America. The idea is those opportunities to practice early and often, along with precocious talent, allowed them to respectively invent software and modern rock and roll. Another example used for pro-specialization arguments is Tiger Woods, who started playing golf before he was 2 years old. Winning his first U.S. Masters at the age of 21 years old.

An alternative approach to youth development is sport diversification, this approach suggests athletic development is optimized when athletes are exposed to general training regimen in which they "sample" or participate in a variety of sports. (Côté et. al. 2009). The idea behind sport generalization is that many sports rely on generalized physical training, basic motor skills, and common tactical strategies, which can transfer from sport to sport. Sport involvement focuses on fun, enjoyment, and competence contributing to intrinsic motivation and persistence for sport expertise. Instead of investing all of ones' effort into one sport with the hopes of becoming elite.

Sport Considerations

Several scholars (Bloom,1985; Côté, 1999; Güllich, 2014; Güllich & Emrich, 2014) have demonstrated that numerous elite athletes actually participated in a wide range of sports prior to specialization in one sport during mid-adolescence. Athletes who are "slow cooked," have the opportunity to develop fine motor skills in a wider spectrum and mature not only physically but psychologically. A couple athletes that were athletically developed using this approach are Roger Federer and Steve Nash. Roger dabbled in multiple sports. His mother was a tennis coach but refused to coach him, she did not want to bring her work home with her. His parents were described as "pully" when it came to sport, they told him not to take it so seriously. As a teenager, Roger decided to give up other sports to focus on tennis on his own terms. By the time he finally gave up other sports, other kids his age had long been working with strength coaches, sport psychologists, and nutritionists. But it did not seem to hamper his development. In his mid- 30s, an age by which even legendary players are typically retired, he would still be ranked #1 in the world (Epstein, 2019). Two-time NBA Most Valuable Player Steve Nash also reported sampling a variety of sports including lacrosse, soccer, and hockey during childhood and then specialized in basketball in his adolescence (Côté et. al., 2009).

These athletes participated in activities that did not necessarily mirror the characteristics of deliberate practice. Instead, these various activities were often characterized by the participants' inherent enjoyment, with rules that were adapted from adult norms and that lacked formal structure or instruction (Côté & Fraser Thomas, 2007). Despite the positive relationship in sports research between cumulative training and expertise, several studies have also acknowledged that involvement in various activities prior to specialization can be viewed as a prerequisite rather than a disadvantage regarding expert performance in the long run (Voigt & Hohmann. 2016).

On the other hand there are sports that may require early specialization if the sole purpose is mastery. The conditions of these sports require complex artistic or

acrobatic maneuvers that must be developed prior to maturation. There is evidence that some maneuvers in gymnastics, diving, figure skating cannot be fully natured after maturation or late specialization (Kimberly et. al. 2013). For adult peak (late specialization) sports such as baseball, basketball, and track and field specialization is not an essential antecedent for expedient sport performance as an adult. With these sports the athletes learn new motor patterns and develop over time.

Developmental Model of Sport Participation

Côté et al. (2007) Developmental Model of Sport Participation (DMSP) describes three stages of paths toward elite participation in sport which account for youths' psychosocial and physical development. Within the first two paths of the DMSP, children aged 6 to 12 engage in sampling which consists of participation in a wide variety of sports that involve high levels of deliberate play and low levels of deliberate practice. Children who wish to engage in sport for recreational purposes will continue from the sampling years into the recreational years (ages 13+). However, youth interested in elite development will continue into the specializing years (ages 13-15) and then into the investment years (ages 16+).

During the recreational years, sport programs still have low levels of deliberate practice but now include age-appropriate competition. In contrast, the specializing and investment years are characterized by participation in fewer sports and less time in deliberate play and more time in deliberate practice. The DMSP also proposes that after the sampling years, children can adjust their involvement to play sports recreationally or they may drop out of sports.

The third and final path of the DMSP consists of specialization in one sport from approximately age 6, and involves high amounts of deliberate practice and low amounts of deliberate play. When considering the dichotomy of early specialization and sampling, it is apparent that both approaches can lead to expertise development under optimal conditions. The goal of early sport participation, however, should not be limited to the development of high-level athletes, especially in school sport programs. Young children's sport experiences should ideally foster positive youth development and a healthy and active lifestyle (Fraser-Thomas, et. al. 2005).

Summary

Youth, including high school sport, is a highly visible and valued activity in communities across the nation as sport is a proving ground for many children and parents alike. We live in a world of high performance ethic and an increased need for gratification letting us know we are on the right path. In today's highly technologically advanced and tight knit world, we have

access to a library of information. Parents, coaches, and athletes can watch competitors from across the globe.

Seeing talented athletes the same age as your child may induce anxiety and mental stress in parents as one may start to second guess the path their child is taking athletically and feel the need to specialize them at a young age to provide the opportunity to keep up with the competitors. What if the child falls behind? If the athlete doesn't focus solely on one sport will they have the opportunity to catch up to the gifted competitors in their age group? The answer is yes. Young athletes can still develop to be gifted competitors without specializing them at a young age.

We need to hit the pause button, we cannot rush the biological clock; when an athlete is ready, the transfer on the playing field will show. As an athletic community we have to understand peak performance is cultivated over time and reached post-puberty. Allowing young athletes to "sample" sports and play for the enjoyment of the game at a young age will allow them to mature at their own rate, find out what sports they enjoy, suits them, and gain confidence over the course of development. Sport diversification allows athletes to do just that.

Diversification allows them to play deliberately and foster intrinsic motivation to participate in sports. Sport diversification is a developmental model that suggests athletes go through a "sampling" period, during the early stages of athletic development. The athlete participates in a variety of sports, usually in an unstructured or lightly structured environment. This allows the athlete to more naturally find where their talents lie at their own developmental pace. As well as cultivating a love for sport, that will stay with them for a lifetime, mitigating the chances of drop out.

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