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Most parents would like to see their child/children experience success in sport. Some may even want to see their child excel at more elite levels, and perhaps attain national and international recognition. The progression from initial youth sport experiences to more elite levels is complex. It involves some degree of identification and selection of talented individuals at virtually all levels of youth sports. However, the process may also involve more formal identification and selection of individuals who presumably have the skill, physical, and behavioral requisites for success in a given sport.

### **Community-Based Youth Sports Programs**

Youth sports programs in the United States are traditionally community-based and encourage mass participation in sports in a wholesome, enjoyable and safe environment. Age and willingness to participate are the criteria for inclusion, and a decision by the parent and child is involved. Very often, choice of a youth sports program is based on convenience.

Within specific programs, local officials and coaches commonly sort youngsters by age and skill level (and body size in some sports) in order to ensure an equitable distribution of talent across teams in a league, and thus equalize competition and reduce the risk of injury. As some programs become more competitive and specialized, identification and selection of talented youngsters occurs both informally (e.g., observing youngsters in game situations and noting those who are more skilled and inviting them for a specific, select team) and formally (e.g., regular tryouts).

Many elite athletes have emerged over the years from community-based programs in the United States. However, there are some in the United States who are interested in and who call for programs that identify and select individuals for specific sports at relatively young ages.

### **Elite Programs**

Some programs emphasize the elite and have as their objective the identification and subsequent training of youngsters with potential for success in regional, national and/or international competition - the so-called high performance sports. The identification and selection process often begins early, is rather systematic, and is done in some sports long before the child is capable of making a decision, or is allowed to make the decision whether or not to participate in the sport.

The identification and selection process for high performance sports may take several forms. It has been very systematic in several Eastern European countries, former members of the Communist bloc, although the viability of such programs has been questioned in light of the relatively recent changes in the political and economic climate. These Eastern European practices have been extended, with modification, to some sports in Western countries, and have been incorporated into those of other countries, with Cuba and China, perhaps, the most visible examples. Unfortunately, only the incredibly small number of successful athletes who have gone through these systematic sport selection programs are highlighted in the national and international sporting media. The vast majority who are not successful are rarely if ever mentioned. One wonders if they still participate in sport after having failed in the selection process.

It is also not uncommon in the U.S. for some parents to take a potentially talented youngster to a gymnastics, tennis or figure skating center to seek the advice of an elite coach. The coach is essentially being asked to evaluate the potential of the child, and if the child meets the criteria of the coach, he or she is essentially identified and selected.

### **Eastern European Selection Programs**

Although there is variation by sport, the general pattern of identification and selection refined in many Eastern European countries is often highlighted by the media as underlying the success of athletes from these countries in Olympic competitions. Indeed, the gymnastics center headed by Bela Karolyi in Houston is modeled to some extent after the Romanian system in which he had his training and early successes.

These identification and selection programs include initial evaluation of motor (skill), physical (size, body build), and behavioral (coachability) characteristics of large numbers of children, very often in state-run schools. The timing of evaluation varies by sport and the process involves several stages. For example, the initial identification and selection for several sports, e.g., gymnastics, diving, swimming, and figure skating, occurs between 3-8 years. Secondary selections, i.e., retention for further specialized training, varies with sport, e.g., 9-10 years for gymnastics, figure skating and swimming, and at 10-15 years for girls and 10-17 years for boys in other sports. Potential rowers, basketball players and weight lifters are generally not selected until

after puberty. Ballet, though considered primarily as an art form, also has rigorous, selective anatomical criteria that rival those of some sports. Emphasis is on linearity and thinness.

Obviously the physical, motor and behavioral requisites vary among sports. Selection is based on the assumption that the requisites for a given sport can be identified at a young age and subsequently perfected through specific training. The process of selection is ongoing as the youngster adapts to the instructional and training programs, as well as the social and emotional demands of the special programs. The success or failure of a talent identification and selection program is dependent upon the balance between the child's ability and the demands of the sport and sports system. Ability is dynamic, changing as the child grows, matures and develops. Quite often, however, the sport and sports system are rather rigid, and do not readily adapt to individual differences in normal growth, maturation and development.

### **Problems with Selection Programs**

Identifying and selecting the potentially talented young athlete is the first step in a relatively long term process, leading to the perfection of talent. The youngster must adapt to the physical, social and emotional demands of the coaches, training programs, and competitions. The process also involves several forms of social manipulation, e.g., long hours of practice, modified school schedules, preferential treatment, differential access to resources, separation of a child from family and peers, and extensive travel.

*Selection programs have problems related to decision making.* Does the child have a voice in the selection process? Are parents involved? Accounts in the electronic and print media often highlight parents who are seemingly more interested in their child's success than is the child. Are decisions made independently by coaches or other sports authorities? What kind of guidance is available for the child, or parents, when he/she is selected? What are the implications of being labeled 'talented' for individual and parental expectations?

*Selection programs are exclusionary.* They initially involve the elimination of many individuals and subsequently cutting of others as competition becomes more specialized and rigorous. The merit of selection programs is usually cast in the context of the number of successful athletes (often, gold medals). Little, if anything, is ever indicated about the individuals who do not make it through the process, and they are by definition the vast majority.

*Some selection programs often involve economic discrimination.* This is especially apparent in sports such as gymnastics, swimming, tennis, figure skating, club soccer, and ice hockey. In these sports, and perhaps others, parental ability to pay for enrollment in a club, for private lessons, and for coaching, eliminates many potentially capable young athletes. On the other hand, some select programs offer scholarships for talented youngsters whose parents do not have the necessary resources.

*Selection practices in many sports also include discrimination along maturational lines.* Boys advanced in biological maturity status tend to perform better than those who are later. In contrast, differences in the performances of girls of contrasting maturity status are not marked, and in some tasks better performances are attained by girls who mature later. Two groups are often excluded and are thus not represented among those who experience success in sport: (1) the late maturing male who is generally at a size and strength disadvantage in most sports which favor the larger, stronger, early maturing boy; and (2) the early maturing girl whose physique and body composition may be a limiting factor in performance and who may not be given an opportunity to try a sport. Both extremes of the normal biological maturational continuum are essentially socialized away from sport, perhaps by the sports system. Opportunities need to be made available for youngsters at the extremes of the maturation continuum.

### **Early Identification and Success in the Future**

Early identification of "talent" is no guarantee of success in sport during childhood, let alone during adolescence and adulthood. There are simply too many intervening variables associated with normal growth, maturation and development, and with the sports system. In some cases, individual characteristics and the sports system interact. In age group swimming, for example, it is not uncommon for a child to be successful in one age group only to be relegated to a low position in the rankings when he/she moves to the next age group. Similarly, changes associated with puberty in young girls often lead to changes in self concept which may influence performance. It is at such transitions that many children realize that there are other things in life in addition to sport. Such transitions are also noted by sport officials, and it has even been suggested that some gymnastics coaches fear puberty more than the young female gymnasts.

Parents of children labeled as talented may develop a false sense of the potential for their child's success in sport either in the form of a college scholarship or a professional career. Some parents even invest considerable sums of money in early sport training for their children. It must be emphasized, however, that the numbers are many and the probability of success is miniscule.

A recent report from the National Center for Educational Statistics (Owings and Burton, 1996) investigated participation in

intercollegiate sports by the 8th grade class of 1988. A national sample of 8th graders was surveyed in 1988 and then followed-up on three occasions about their participation status in high school and intercollegiate varsity sports. The third follow-up was completed in 1994. Of the approximately 3 million 8th graders in 1988, only about 5% (52 per 1000) reported participation in intercollegiate sports. Limiting observations to NCAA Division I schools, only about 2% (22 per 1000) reported participation, and the number is reduced even more when only those who received athletic financial aid is considered. In 1992-1993, only about one-half (48%) of all NCAA Division I athletes received athletic aid, i.e., scholarship support. Clearly, the probability of obtaining a college scholarship for sport is quite small. The statistics are even more remote when the probability of a career in professional sport is considered.

## **Parents of Elite Young Athletes**

Talent identification and selection for sport is not inherently wrong. Concerns commonly focus on how the selection program is used, how the sport system treats the young athlete once he/she is identified as talented, unrealistic expectations, decision making, progression with age, and related issues. Parents of talented young athletes need to be aware of these considerations, and perhaps others.

Several suggestions for parents of elite young athletes follow.

Let your child participate in the decision making process. Also, provide your child with an opportunity to remove herself or himself from a select program if she/he wishes.

Select a coach who, on one hand, will challenge and improve the abilities of your child, but who, on the other hand, will still keep the sport fun.

Some youngsters may make remarkable progress as they enter an elite program so that the child, parent, and/or coach would like to accelerate movement within the sport. Parents and coaches need to recognize problems associated with moving up too fast in a sport.

Monitor the environment of the elite training program. Observe coach behaviors and listen to the feedback given by the coach to the young athletes. Is it instructional, or demeaning and threatening? Are there pressures related to diet, weight regulation, weight training, and conditioning regimens that may be inappropriate for the child and potentially harmful? Do the young athletes have any say about when and how much they practice and compete? Participation in sport should be fun and enjoyable; it should not be a job.

Be careful of over-involvement in your child's athletic training and aspirations. Is it the child's dream of success or yours?

Give consideration to potential life style consequences for both the young athlete and the family.

Remember, sport should be fun. Listen to your child!

## **Suggested Reading**

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