

Excerpt from...

Childhood to Champion Athlete, by Tudor Bompá

The first experience in a sport is critical for the ongoing development of any athlete. If the experience is positive, the child will likely continue participating. If the experience is negative, the young participant may drop out of the sport, and lose interest in physical activity.

Many children now have their first sporting experience in organized competition. Children, as young as four years of age, often participate in structured leagues, or tournaments where there are formalized rules and referees, official team kits, and winning is the primary objective.

There is a great deal of support, from a variety of adults, for organized competitive sports for children. Many individuals believe that it is important for children to experience winning and losing, and that organized sports provide a forum for children to develop values and skills that will help them later in life. Although there is some merit to this perspective, there are many psychological demands on children, which can have an adverse effect on their growth and development, and may prevent potential world champions from optimally developing their talent.

This article will address some of the controversial issues surrounding highly organized competitive sports programs for children.

PUTTING WINNING INTO PERSPECTIVE

Children love to compete!

This is a known fact for anyone in child education, including physical education and sports. The influence of sports on their daily lives is profound. Children are greatly influenced by their coach, who often may become their role model, as well as by top athletes in their sport, who are their heroes. Therefore, the influence sports have on children is not to be taken lightly.

Children are very athletically minded, and as such, many of them participate in sports. According to recent studies on the topic, 45% of 10 year olds participate in sports! However, as they grow older, almost half of them drop out of sports (at the age of 18 only 26% stay active).

One of the most frequently asked questions about children and sport is:

"To be a world champion, is it important to win a lot during childhood?" The answer is, 'NO'.

To expect potential world champions to be winners from an early age, is like expecting a business to be extremely profitable from its first month of operation.

Similarly to business, if a solid foundation is not developed during early years, the chances of being successful for a long period of time are drastically reduced. If winning is emphasized, there is much more likelihood that a solid foundation will not be developed, and that children will experience a variety of problems, both physical and psychological.

THE PROBLEMS WITH WINNING

Discrimination Against Late Maturing Children

Coaches who want to win usually play their best players. Often, the best players are those who have matured early; they are often larger, stronger, faster, and have more endurance than late maturing children. In most cases, early maturing children occupy the starting positions on teams, while the late

maturers sit on the bench.

There is little doubt that the early maturing child is usually the better athlete during childhood, but there is a great deal of research which indicate that late maturing children may have a greater potential of reaching international standards in a specific sport during adulthood. In fact, in their quest to dominate the athletic world, the former communist nations of Eastern Europe switched in the 1980's their preference to select talented children for sports, from early to late maturers. Their prior decision to select early matures has only sometimes met their expectations. Late matures, however, had more consistency and in most cases achieved higher performance.

Late maturing children start into their adolescent growth spurt at a later stage of development than early maturing children and, in most cases, their growth spurt lasts longer. As a result, by the time late maturing children reach adulthood, they may be more athletically developed than early maturing children. Unfortunately, in many sports programs for children, late maturers do not have equal opportunities to participate because of over emphasis placed on winning. They are, in many situations, discriminated against.

Coping With Failure

The overemphasis placed on winning can also cause some problems for early maturing children. There are many studies that demonstrate that those children who experience winning constantly during their pre-pubescent years, have a much more difficult time coping with losing at a later stage of development. As a result, many early maturing children drop out of sports, and in some cases, withdraw from participating in any form of physical activity. This is a serious problem. Even though they are no longer winning in a particular sport, there are probably a number of sports which they could be successful at. Unfortunately, they have put so much energy into developing their talent in a particular sport that they have been provided with very few opportunities to develop skills that will help them in other sports later in life.

Injuries

It is essential for us to put winning into perspective in children's sports programs, particularly if we want to provide more children with opportunities to reach high national standards in a specific sport. During childhood, the emphasis in sports programs should be on basic skill development and above all, providing opportunities to have fun.

From a physical development perspective, the stresses of pre-pubescent competitive sports are often great enough to endanger normal growth. Between 10 and 14 years of age, most children experience a period of rapid growth. During this time, their bodies are weaker, muscles developing at different rates, and their bones become partially ossified. Pre-pubescent children are extremely vulnerable to injury.

Emotional damage

If it is important for children to learn and develop skills in a sports program, then it is essential for us to control the competitive stresses. Young children learn most efficiently in a non-stressful environment. Excessive stress, often caused by the emphasis placed on winning in sports, frequently results in negative self-perceptions and severely hinders the learning process.

Children find sports stressful when they perceive they will not be able to adequately respond to the demands of the competition, and therefore risk a negative social evaluation of athletic competence. In such a situation, the stress becomes the negative emotion or anxiety that children experience. Competitive stress can occur at any time. The most common times are prior to the competition (when the child anticipates a poor performance), during the competition (if the child perceives his/her ongoing performance to be inadequate), and following the competition (if the completed performance is considered inadequate).

The majority of children, particularly late maturers, are very concerned about making a mistake. In many cases, the anxiety that results from their concerns will prevent them from playing in the future. If children, however, have fun during the game, they will likely be less stressed after the game.

Fun is a critical component of sports programs for children. Too often we assume that children are having fun. According to many studies, the most common reason for withdrawal from competition is when the sport ceases to be fun.

If we are interested in expanding the talent pool of potential club & national level athletes, it is important for us to provide more opportunities for children to learn the fundamentals of sports in a fun, low-stress environment. This is very difficult to do if winning is the primary objective. If less emphasis was placed on winning and more on having fun, fewer children would drop out of sports.

WHY CHILDREN PARTICIPATE IN SPORTS

Many adults believe that winning is important to children. Although children may initially say that winning is important (probably because of the large trophies and plaques that they might be able to win), there are other personal, more important reasons why children participate in sports.

Children have specific needs that can be satisfied by participating in a well structured sport program. Among the most important needs to be fulfilled are:

Affiliation

Children want to be part of the team. They like to be affiliated with a group. They enjoy being with their peers and want to be socially accepted.

Skill development

Children want to develop skills. This not only helps their potential performance in sports, but it helps them feel good about their bodies and their abilities. A great deal of their self-esteem revolves around their physical abilities.

Excitement

Children get excited about many different things. Many children experience a great deal of pleasure and enjoyment from actively participating in a sports program.

Success and Status

Children enjoy success, and like being recognized for their accomplishments. In many cases, however, children who are developing their sports talents are not positively reinforced. Often, individual improvements in skills are overshadowed by the overemphasis placed on winning. This is particularly true for late maturing children.

Fitness

As children grow, it is important for them to develop a positive self-image. Often, this image revolves largely around their physical appearance. Children need to feel good about themselves, particularly their physical self, if they are going to develop a high level of self esteem.

Many sports programs do not cater to the personal needs of children. When winning is important, many children are pressured into participating by parents, and other adults. This form of motivation can be detrimental to young children. If children are forced to compete, they will merely go through the motions. It will be difficult for them to become intrinsically motivated and committed when they have very little input, if any, into the decision to participate. If the children are not allowed to select posts that allow them to demonstrate their competence, they may become stressed, lose confidence, feel helpless and it is quite likely that they will eventually drop out.

Unfortunately, many parents do not solicit input from their children and, in most cases, parents do not have the ability to select suitable sports programs. Parents often evaluate their children's abilities unrealistically high, resulting in negative self perceptions and feelings of failure. Since the social

comparison process between 6 and 12 years of age is based largely on competence in physical abilities, this can, potentially, destroy self-esteem.

DE-EMPHASIZING WINNING

Participating in sports primarily for winning, gaining recognition, and attaining awards can be detrimental to children. Extrinsic sources of motivation, such as medals, trophies and even financial reward, may eventually undermine intrinsic motivation. Extrinsic rewards can be used as initial motivators to involve children in sports, but they must not be used to reinforce individual performance improvement, particularly skill development.

Within the current sports system, it is difficult to reinforce individual performance because of the emphasis on winning. To effectively reinforce talent development, children have to be encouraged to work at their own rate. This can be accomplished most effectively if winning is de-emphasized.

FUN represents the main reason children participate in sports. They want to enjoy themselves, improve skills, to stay in shape and belong with their peers. Although victory is the most publicized aspect of sports, winning does not seem to be the major motivational factor for young people to take part in sports. Even for the most successful athletes, both boys and girls regard skill improvement, and not winning as the main reason they are involved in competitive sports. According to studies the following are the 10 most important reasons children participate in sports:

1. To have fun.
2. To improve skills.
3. To stay in shape.
4. To do something one is good at.
5. For the excitement of competition.
6. To get exercise.
7. To play as part of a team.
8. For the challenge of competition.
9. To learn new skills.
10. To win.

As seen above, winning get low marks! And yet, our society, the media and parents consider and publicize winning as the main goal of sports!

EMPHASIZING SKILL DEVELOPMENT

If we are really interested in developing talented athletes, it is essential for us to de-emphasize winning in sports programs for children, and emphasize skill development

If winning is emphasized, children are often placed into situations that are too stressful for adequately developing skill. As a result, they are often reinforcing, and further developing, skills that are technically incorrect.

The best way for children to develop skills is to practice them in a fun, non-stressful, non-threatening environment. This type of environment seldom exists within competitive sports programs. In most cases, children are competing too frequently and, as a result, they have difficulty finding the necessary time to practice the skills that will help them become better athletes.

In some leagues, such as football, where young children are expected to compete in as many as 30 games in a season, very little time is allotted to skill development. During each game, the children are applying, not developing, their skills in order to win. If children have not properly developed their skills prior to application in a game, they will be reinforcing poor technique and, unquestionably, developing some bad habits.

Once bad technical habits have been developed, they are very difficult to correct. If children are not provided with opportunities to develop skills properly before they are pressured to apply them in a competitive environment, they will likely develop skills that may be suitable for success at that particular stage of development, but not suitable for higher levels of competition.

MULTI-SKILL DEVELOPMENT

In addition to developing fundamental skills for a specific sport, it is important for young children to develop a variety of skills that will help them become good general athletes, before they start training in a specific sport.

This form of preparation for sports, often referred to as multi-skill development, is common in Eastern European countries. In some countries, children attend sports schools where they participate in a basics training program. At these schools, children develop fundamental sport skills such as running, jumping, throwing, catching, tumbling, and balancing.

In addition to becoming extremely co-ordinated, the skills that children learn are fundamental to success in a variety of individual and team sports, such as track and field, basketball, and soccer. In most of the programs, there is also a swimming component. Swimming helps children develop their aerobic capacities, while minimizing the physical stresses on their bodies, particularly in the joints.

If we encourage children to develop a variety of skills, they will probably experience success in a number of sporting activities. As a result, many children will be interested in continuing their participation in sports and physical activity, and some children will have the inclination and desire to specialize and further develop their sports talent.

It is important for us to provide children who are interested in further developing their talent with the necessary guidance and opportunities. It takes years of training to become a world class level athlete. We must provide athletes who are striving for excellence with a systematic, long-term training plan that is based on sound, scientific principles.

***Tudor Bompa** is the father of periodization, a training system developed by the Soviets that aimed for optimal performance by varying the training stress throughout the year rather than maintaining a constant training focus. Bompa's training theory was laid out in his seminal work *Theory and Methodology of Training*. Bompa's understanding of assisted the Eastern Bloc domination of athletic competitions for three decades. He was on the faculty of the Romanian Institute of Sport.*

As a coach, Dr. Bompa trained 11 medalists in various Olympics (2 gold medals) and World championships in 2 sport disciplines: track and field and rowing. He was himself an Olympic rower, and he later revolutionized the training concepts in cross country skiing.