

Early Specialisation – Some Thoughts

I have been following Vern Gambetta's recent thoughts on early specialisation and he, again, makes many valid points in his commentary - *"In the whole athlete development process we are very aware of the dangers of early specialization and even over specialization in young developing athletes."*

Others have also made comment that we should all consider when dealing with the developing athlete:

"While associations between early specialization and expertise development are highlighted, much research also suggests early specialization is associated with a range of negative consequences affecting physical, psychological, and social development. Baker et al 2009."

"With the exception of select sports such as gymnastics in which the elite competitors are very young, the best data we have would suggest that the odds of achieving elite levels with this method are exceedingly poor. In fact, some studies indicate that early specialization is less likely to result in success than participating in several sports as a youth, and then specializing at older ages." DiFiori, 2013

I have no intention of joining the argument just for the sake of an argument or to take a particular stance for no good reason. We can keep arguing and little gets done. I happen to see things a little more from the athlete's point of view. By some influence young participants get 'drawn' to a sport. These influences range from teachers, peers, parental involvement, and the media and are powerful reasons for participation for those who choose.

The first reaction to this should be one of joy. They have decided to opt-out of a sedentary existence and get active. What happens next is the key issue. Regardless of how young they are when they get 'hooked' on the sport, we should nurture this interest and, at the same time, make decisions that guard against the negative effects of early specialisation. Let us not forget that the negative elements of this phenomenon are seen when the adults get it wrong – not when a young athlete gets it wrong. We, as adults, have the opportunity, regardless of the age of the athlete, to get it right – and in many cases we fail.

Getting involved early in a sport is not the problem. It is inappropriate, biased, unbalanced coaching and teaching that causes the problems. If you only focus on the outcomes of the contest; or the exercises you choose from your toolbox are only the sports specific movements and postures; or you only train at the game intensity; or you only coach by formal instruction with little or no experimentation taking place; or you coach only those who can win games for you; or you do everything based on a fixture list – then YOU are the problem.

Far smarter people than me have argued the pros and cons of this issue and although I tend to be on the side of the 'generalists' I do understand that there are many aspects to the argument. One is the young person – and they must always be considered. Plenty of young people fall in love with a sport quite early in their lives and it would be foolish of us to fight against this.

Certainly our task as a teacher or coach is to be inclusive of all children and create an environment of learning where all can progress and stay engaged – BUT – we cannot also ignore those who are committed quite early. I am not endorsing the 'over-committed' parent or coach here, who pushes young children to inappropriate levels of work and intensity for their own foolish gain. I am talking about the young person who simply loves a certain sport.

While we argue about the do's and don'ts of early specialisation keep in mind that as a teacher or coach you are not forced to be a specialist with this young person – you can be a generalist in what and how you deliver to the young person in front of you. It is you that chooses the content of each session you deliver. You can get it right if you choose to, although in many cases the education you have been exposed to can be your downfall. If all you have been taught is sports-specific technical stuff then the chances are that is all you will ever deliver. Take the FIFA document *'For the Good of*

the Game' - Part One – General Part – Chapter 10 – 'The Player of Tomorrow'. Here the world Federation lays its cards on the table as to how we should treat the developing player. In the section titled *BASIC TRAINING – Children's football 8-12 years of age*, they state that one major unit of development is 'The development of coordination (psychomotor skills)'. They go on to say that the vehicle for this is - "The introduction of technical work can help to train basic movement skills (e.g. coaches can work on balance, on footwork, on differentiation and on rhythm.

My reaction to these statements is that we don't just need 'help to train these basic movement skills' – we need them at the centre of things - taught correctly as the major stepping stone to sports-specific progression later on. By paying but 'lip-service' to the current physical literacy problem FIFA are doing a disservice to their own sport and the millions who want to play it. There are even some nations that have excluded all developing players from using gymnasiums during their journey as part of the push to technical and tactical development.

Now we are closer to the problem. The idea that simply repeating the sports-specific movements of the sport will develop the all-round movement vocabulary required for future success is a mistake. The key to these early stages is that of being a 'generalist'. Your job is to ensure movement efficiency and precision in every joint, in every plane, amplitude, direction and speed – and not just the sports-specific actions and postures. You should embrace a range of teaching styles that allows the full spectrum from solving movement puzzles through to explicit teaching processes. You should know what the 'keystone' movements are and how they should be taught and progressed towards a wide and deep movement vocabulary.

If all you do is offer a watered-down adult version of the sport or focus solely on the technical and tactical elements or offer only the sports-specific actions and postures then there will be a problem with early specialisation. And the problem is you – not the young athlete. Every coach has the opportunity to offer a holistic approach to the developing athlete in terms of the manner of their coaching and the exercises they select during the journey.

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