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Fitness Through Sports?

Parents who want their kids to be active sign them up for sports, but early specialization and pressure to perform often take young athletes out of the game for life.

By Chris Cooper

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Courtesy of Joseph Vigil

Are athletes made by playing or training?

At the 2014 NHL Scouting Combine, Sam Bennett couldn't do a pull-up. The 17-year-old faced criticism from various media outlets, but none were able to say why he should be able to do a pull-up. Without an objectively measurable scale of "fitness"—or even a definition—writers knew something was wrong with a potential No. 1 draft pick who couldn't do a single pull-up, but they couldn't say what, exactly.

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"For every kid like this, there's a waiting line of kids who don't make it and still can't do a pull-up," said Jeff Martin, co-founder of CrossFit Kids. "If he dislocates his shoulders or gets injured, he'll have the money to get fixed. They won't."

Seventy percent of kids **drop out** of their primary sport before they're 13. Most of those say their sport should be more fun. Decades of research and practice paint a very clear picture: Early specialization in one sport is a bad idea.

So why are kids playing hockey in the summer instead of doing pull-ups?

The Next One, the Pull-Up and the Great One

No one would disagree with the idea that kids should play more. With adolescent obesity rates a constant topic in the media, it's conceivable the next generation's health crisis could cause a financial crisis. To help their kids get active, many parents turn to sport. Despite the cost, many parents hope a few hours of activity will encourage their kids to stay healthy. Some hope for leadership and teamwork opportunities for their kids; others are living their own athletic fantasies through their children. Whatever the reason, many kids now play "their" sport year round. As competition occurs

at a younger age, so do overuse injury and burnout, defeating the parents' original purpose.

Bennett's failed pull-up wasn't indicative of a failed athlete but rather a system built to produce a one-dimensional player. Bennett's comment to The Canadian Press—"But, I guess, ultimately games aren't won or lost if you can do a pull-up in the gym"—is both true and false. A pull-up isn't a sport-specific movement for hockey. On the other hand, a fitness program without equal parts pulling and pushing is imbalanced by definition.

"All of our ideas about sports are, 'Let's get them into the intensity part of the sport when they're 4 to 6 years old,'" Martin said. "We're doing it backward."

The Calgary Flames took Bennett fourth in the 2014 NHL Draft, and deservedly so. He's a good hockey player. But are sport-specific movements really best for developing long-term athleticism?

"For every (Bennett), there are thousands of kids who dedicate themselves to hockey who aren't physically literate," Martin continued. "When they can't play hockey, they have nothing."



Courtesy of Andréane Fraser



Courtesy of Andréane Fraser

In 1980, Wayne Gretzky—regarded by most as one of the best hockey players of all time and nicknamed “The Great One”—was offered a contract to play baseball for the Toronto Blue Jays. Though stories of young Gretzky’s passion for practice on the rink are ubiquitous, he played baseball and lacrosse all summer.

With artificial ice now widely available, many modern young hockey players attend hockey schools for weeks at a time in summer. Many attend dry-land training camps, where exercises selected to duplicate hockey movements are repeated. Instead of a broad-based approach in which every joint is exposed to equal movement in every plane, players sometimes create joint-dominance problems such as patellofemoral syndrome before they’re 13. This single-minded approach to sport as a child might create an imbalanced adult athlete.

“We’re starting to see these 25-year-old guys who played a sport in high school—they look OK but can’t squat without a chair,” Martin said. “They don’t have the kinesiologic awareness to do it. And they were *athletes*.”

Sport has a broad appeal to parents of young children: It’s fun—at least at first—and it’s undeniably better than sitting on a couch. But competition creates a funnel effect where the best keep playing only until they’re not good enough for the next level. When they’re “cut,” so is their pursuit of fitness.

The Long-Term Athletic Development Model

The [Canadian Sport for Life website](#) lists seven stages of Long-Term Athletic Development. These include five phases: Active Start, Learn to Train, Train to Train, Train to Compete and Train to Win. Although not every Canadian coach follows the plan, the model does encourage starting fitness with the end in mind.

Martin is aware of the LTAD model and said it’s a positive first step.

“At least (Canadians) have something,” he said. “We don’t.”

The LTAD model might not be perfect, said Martin, but at least it’s proactive. Many U.S. agencies are ineffective because they only give negative direction. Parents, bombarded with media messages of what not to do simply don’t know the downsides of competition at an early age. And coaches are judged only on their win-loss record, not their ability to deliver fun.

“There is no organization in the U.S. that looks at children and believes kids should move fast and with load before

they move well,” Martin said. “But that message doesn’t reach parents or coaches. So we just add more competition.”

He points to a [study](#) citing this statistic: Athletes who made it to the top tier of their sport, on average, chose to specialize in that sport two years *later* than those who didn’t quite make it. In other words, top athletes spent more time building a broad athletic base. This is counterintuitive to many parents, Martin said.

“You have a kid who is being trained in sport, and it ends up blunting their progress as an athlete,” he added.

“You look at the pyramid of genetic potential. What happens if you remove the nutrition part? The pyramid is much smaller. What happens if you remove general physical preparedness?” Martin asked.

“If you take those pieces out, the genetic potential of an athlete is muted,” he said.

A change in environment might help keep kids mentally fresh. In the 2008 study “Examining Adolescent Sport Dropout and Prolonged Engagement From a Developmental Perspective,” researchers discovered kids who quit swimming early had several things in common: early specialization, more dry-land training and less time off. Though their performance matched that of their peers, they no longer enjoyed participating. The majority listed “lack of interest” as their primary reason for quitting. They were bored.

Repetition, lack of time for outside interests and pressure to perform: It’s the perfect recipe for a disinterested kid. Success in competition means living with all three; success in fitness does not.

Starting From Play

The CrossFit Kids model of development begins with raising interest in movement. In other words, fun comes first.

“Take a preschool kid; they don’t understand mechanics yet,” Martin explained.

Their proprioceptive abilities haven’t been enhanced, and so CrossFit Kids focuses on vestibular exercise. Slowly, as the children become more aware of their physical positions in space, they move better.

“As they start to grow toward Kids class, they have mechanics, but they’re not consistent,” Martin continued. “This takes years. You don’t get mechanics and consistency (together) until you’re far into the Teen class.”

Courtesy of Andréane Fraser



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The CrossFit Level 1 Seminar reinforces the concept of mechanics, then consistency and then intensity. Martin said this process is the same in children, but the timeline is stretched out.

“We talk about adults understanding mechanics in two to three weeks and being consistent in three to four months,” he said. “You can introduce intensity fairly quickly, like two to four weeks.”

He continued: “You don’t introduce kids to intensity until they’re 10 or 11.”

In other words, until they’ve been moving consistently for a long time.

The question not answered by the LTAD model: How do you engage a kid—and his parents—long enough to move him through the stages? The answer is twofold, and CrossFit coaches already know the first part: It has to be fun.

The second part is more complicated.

Goal-Directed Behavior

“I’ll give you a dollar for every goal you score.”

“If we win tonight, we’re all going for pizza after the game.”

This focus on outcome—points scored, games won—can be detrimental in the long term. Parents who push their kids to excel on the field usually want their kids to learn “what it takes to win.” That’s admirable but is probably having the opposite effect: A national [survey](#) of 5,275 high-school athletes revealed teens would rather play in a game for a losing team than sit on the bench for a winning team. According to [other studies](#) of youth athletes who quit before age 14, most listed “too much pressure to perform/win” as one of their main reasons for quitting.

“Most former athletes will tell you that what they miss most in retirement is competing in sports, not just the winning of games,” wrote Chuck Wilson, one of the original hosts of ESPN Radio and founder of [EvenField.org](#).

Wilson said he believes the pep talk before the game should focus on values instead of tactics. Echoing Martin’s views on consistency before intensity, Wilson advocates building athletes before building specialists.

“When kids are having fun, seeing themselves improve, and playing their sport with integrity, they are more likely to stay involved,” he wrote on [Evenfield.org’s](#) blog. “They play with effort, enthusiasm and confidence. This helps develop a desire to compete and excel.”

And there's another critical time to emphasize play over victory: the car ride home. In ["The Real Reason Why Our Kids Quit Sport,"](#) Australian news reporter Kathleen Noonan emphasized the "teaching moment" intrinsic in the journey home.

Quoting Peter Gahan, head of player and coach development at Australia Baseball, Noonan advised parents to say something like, "Geez, I love watching you play out there" instead of pointing out missed opportunities.

Beyond the Scoreboard

Eventually, every athlete will retire from his or her sport—usually before age 30. What happens next? Some, like professional-hockey-player-turned-gym-owner Scott Thornton, will broaden their fitness horizons.

Thornton, who was voted "Fittest Player in the NHL" several times during his 18-year career, regularly pursued triathlons and marathons during the offseason. He had an easy segue into CrossFit after he retired, but others don't have the same transition.

"I think playing multiple sports as a kid makes you a better athlete to begin with," said Thornton, who owns CrossFit Indestri in Ontario, Canada. "Nothing gets stale. In retirement, getting back to other sports that you love keeps you healthy and active."

While Bennett couldn't do a single pull-up as a 17-year-old hockey player, Brandon Wheat Kings center Jayce Hawryluk and Czech winger David Pastrnak each completed 12 to [set the best marks in the combine test.](#) Time will tell who plays the best hockey and who continues to pursue fitness when their ice time is over. But parents of kids who aren't top draft picks—and even those who are—should consider building an athlete first, then possibly specializing later.

Narrowing the focus to competition for its own sake—creating "Little League parents" in the process—is antithetical to Martin and CrossFit Kids. While competition is part of the pursuit of fitness, it is not the ultimate end at a young age.

Pursue fitness, then sport, rather than fitness through sport.



About the Author

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If athletes are pigeonholed at a young age, what will that do to their athletic development?