

Early bird does not always get the worm

Youngsters need time to grow

WHAT makes champions? How best do we turn promising juniors into elite adults? What should be done — coaching and competition-wise — on the pathway to the podium? These questions were among the topics of discussion in Oxford last week, where I gave a presentation on real-world challenges facing youth development at a conference arranged by an organisation that oversees private school sport in the UK.

I always leave such meetings stimulated, but bristling with envy and frustration at how far we continue to fall behind our rivals, who invest millions of pounds into thousands of qualified coaches and hundreds of high-performance managers, scientists and doctors.

One area where the English might be falling short of the ideal, however, is in something called “compulsion”, where children who show promise in a particular sport are forced to specialise in that sport from the start of their high school lives.

This turns 14-year-olds into professional athletes, who sacrifice opportunities to play other sports to pursue success in one. It struck me that we also do this in South Africa, particularly in rugby and cricket, where our global standing owes itself to our outstanding school systems.

Compulsion is an example of doing the wrong thing because of our desire to get ahead of the game by starting young. There is now evidence that delaying specialisation and higher training volumes is more likely to ensure success, and that those who train more prior to the mid-teenage years are actually less likely to become elite.

This is counter-intuitive, because we've been sold the stories of Tiger Woods and Serena Williams as if they are the norm. They're not. For every Tiger, there are hundreds who try but fail using the same approach. To quote author David Epstein, they are “unicorns”, the exceptions to the rule, and trying to force children onto that path is likely to harm their chances and probably ensure that they become completely inactive in adulthood.

We have some data from rugby revealing that, from the age of 13 to 16, the fall-out is high — only one in every four “elite” 13-year-olds (who play Craven Week) will graduate to the Under-16 tournament. From 16 to 18, the conversion is better — 76% will go on to play Under-18 Craven Week. This is because success requires certain physiological attributes — height, speed, mass and strength, and

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it's not possible to know who will possess these until after adolescence. That's why the current selection of 13-year-olds, a guess based on “today”, should ideally be delayed to after development differences are ironed out.

This wouldn't be a problem were it not for the fact that the selection of children into “elite squads” at 13 means that other children are “deselected”.

When that happens, it cuts the pool of viable players before accurate prediction is possible. It also means that the selected few are forced to specialise, denying them opportunities to sample other sports, where their success may be even greater. Finally, it creates a market where a career path is established as young as 12, with scholarships and contracts being offered ever younger, potentially driving destructive behaviour. For rugby, this is not

a huge problem because the system is so large that inefficiencies are accommodated. For smaller sports, it is potentially disastrous.

It's tempting for parents and coaches to drive this thinking, but the better path is diversification, where many sports are sampled until an informed decision can be made as late as possible.

Keep as many options possible open for as long as possible. It's also the path to balanced, rounded individuals, rather than the creation of an army of “ghosts” who showed early promise, but got chewed up by a ruthless system and ceased all sport by the time they left school. And remember, it's never too late to succeed, unless we decide it is.

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TV HIGHLIGHTS

Basketball: College games, Syracuse vs Notre Dame at 2am (tomorrow), Oklahoma State vs Iowa State at 4am, both on SS9; World Cup draw, 8pm on SS6
Ice hockey: NHL, Detroit Red Wings vs Vancouver Canucks at 2.30am (tomorrow) on SS6
Rugby: Varsity Cup, NMMU vs Maties at 4.30pm, Tuks vs UJ at 6.45pm, both on SS1/CSN
Soccer: English Premier League, Manchester City vs Chelsea at 10pm on SS3; La Liga, Villarreal vs Osasuna at 11pm on SS5