

# Spare sporting kids the risk of burnout

THE Sports Science Institute of SA last week held a successful conference on youth sport and talent development, bringing together a number of internationally acclaimed scientists and leaders in the field to talk to local coaches and sports administrators about what they should be doing to give our youth the best possible chances at a) podiums and medals, and b) a life of enjoyable sports participation.

That's not in order of priority, by the way.

These events always leave me with a mix of optimism and frustration. Optimism exists because they showcase our passionate army of "foot soldiers", men and women who work in clubs, federations and schools, often as volunteers and despite limited resources, keeping our sporting CV where it should be (few high-level leaders attend, if you are wondering).

Frustration replaces this when I realise that this "army", so enthusiastic and ready for action, lacks the direction and purpose that effective leadership would provide. The soldiers need the weapons and armour that information and knowledge provide, and so such conferences have to be prioritised in a strategic manner if we

are to raise the collective IQ of sport in this country.

The latest conference was all about our IQ in youth sports, and one passionate volunteer spoke to me after a talk I gave on the need to find a balance between what science says is ideal (delay specialisation and encourage wide sports participation) and what the "market" forces on athletes (to pick early, and train hard in one sport).

Her need for information concerned a talented 11-year-old runner and cricketer at her school. She felt that the province he was in was unable to provide the necessary support, and wanted to know how to advise a father who recognised his son's ability and wanted to give him the best start possible.

Every situation is unique — talent pathways are not hats where "one size fits all", but the advice to this teacher, this boy and his father is a good lesson for any parents, teachers or coaches reading this.

The fundamental point is that 11 is too young to commit to a single sport. There are many reasons for this. Studies show an increased risk of injury and burnout with early selection of talent and its specialisation. Play and compete early and you're likely to give it up later.

DOCTOR KNOW

ROSS TUCKER



We also know that children who do more training before the age of about 16 will likely underperform, reaching lower levels than those who play more sports for as long as possible.

This flies in the face of a popular narrative that we are fed by the likes of Malcolm Gladwell and Matthew Syed, who have popularised the idea that it takes 10 000 hours of specific practice to achieve expertise,

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using examples like Tiger Woods, André Agassi or the Williams sisters as illustrations of how success is attained.

I cannot stress enough that these examples are the unicorns, the exceptions, and not the norm. The better path is to engage in as many sports as possible when young (called sampling and diversification), and to specialise only after adolescence.

The problem with the 10 000-hour mindset is that it drives the exact behaviours that undermine sporting success, namely early specialisation and high training volume.

A big part of the reason for this is that elite performance is hugely influenced by physical characteristics, and most only appear after adolescence.

Height, speed, power, strength and muscle mass are all vital, but none can be predicted with 100% accuracy.

The bottom line is that anyone who is gambling on the talent of someone prior to adolescence is placing all their chips on a single number and hoping the ball lands there. We cannot know until later, so the advice to the teacher, the 11-year old and his father, is to play as many sports as possible and decide after the watershed that is adolescence.

## Lewis will be pushed all the way

DANIEL JOHNSON

IT WAS an extraordinary, nail-biting finish to the Spanish Grand Prix, as Lewis Hamilton held off his late-charging team-mate Nico Rosberg to take victory by less than a second.

The German threw everything at Hamilton in the closing laps, but the small margin the Briton had enjoyed from the start remained, as he took the chequered flag for the fourth race in succession to finally capture the Formula 1 championship lead.

It is the first time he has held it since the Canadian Grand Prix in 2012.

Rosberg will be bitterly disappointed to miss out by a fraction in yet another straight fight between the pair. Behind it was another impressive performance by Daniel Ricciardo to take his first podium, after it was so cruelly stripped from him in Melbourne. His team-mate Sebastian Vettel clawed his way



BRIT GRIT: Lewis Hamilton of Great Britain and Mercedes GP celebrates taking the lead in the drivers' championship after winning the Spanish Grand Prix yesterday. Picture: DAN ISTITENE/GETTY IMAGES

up to fourth from 15th on the grid, with Williams' Valtteri Bottas in fifth.

Hamilton will never have been as nervous as in the final 10 laps. His agitation over the team radio rose to something akin to trauma as Rosberg moved into position to strike on the final lap.

But it was not to be, and

Hamilton withstood immense pressure to take his first win at the Circuit de Catalunya.

"Nico was quicker this weekend, but fortunately I was able to keep him behind," Hamilton said on the podium.

Mind games or honesty? Either way, Rosberg needs to start converting promising pace into victories over Hamil-

ton. No driver has ever won four consecutive races in a single season and not won the world title in the history of Formula 1.

But, as yesterday afternoon showed, Hamilton will be made to work for his second championship all the way by Rosberg. Hamilton won by just 0.6 seconds.

## Crusaders nail Reds in Queensland

A RELENTLESS Crusaders side compiled a record Super rugby score at Lang Park to crush the Queensland Reds 57-29 yesterday and issue an ominous warning to their competition rivals.

In the teams' first meeting in Brisbane since the 2011

title-decider, the Reds edged the Crusaders 17-16 in a tight first half but slipped five tries after the break as the seven-times champions ran riot to win their fifth game in a row.

Wingers Nemani Nadolo and Johnny McNicholl each scored a brace of tries, with

prop Wyatt Crockett and number eight Luke Whitelock also touching down to cement a top six spot for the Crusaders.

The 2011 champions Reds scored four tries but remain bottom of the Australian conference. — Reuters

## TELEVISION HIGHLIGHTS

TODAY

**Cricket:** IPL, Sunrisers vs Indians at 4.30pm on SS2  
**Cycling:** Tour of California, stage 2 at 11pm on SS2  
**Hockey:** Varsity Games, NMMU vs UCT at 5pm, Maties vs UJ at 6.45pm, both on SSSelect  
**Soccer:** English Championship, promotion play-off, second leg, QPR vs Wigan at 8.30pm on SS3  
**Tennis:** ATP Rome Masters at 11am on SS6