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The Divide in Youth Sports: How to Help Non-Elite Athletes

Brad Strand, Ph.D.
North Dakota State University

Briana Hanley
Sheyenne High School

Tanner Carlson
Wyndmere Public School

Brad Strand is a Professor of Physical Education at North Dakota State University. Brian Hanley teaches Physical Education and Health at Sheyenne High School in West Fargo, North Dakota. Tanner Carlson is a teacher and coach at Wyndmere Public School in Wyndmere, North Dakota.

Abstract

In the US, parents, coaches, and fans have created a win-first, athletes-second mentality relative to children and youth playing sports. Rather than encouraging young athletes to have fun and play, a “win-first” mentality has been adopted. This approach makes it difficult for late bloomers, whom we are calling the non-elites, to enjoy the benefits that youth sport offers. This paper identifies reasons why non-elite athletes get left behind and offers suggestions on how coaches and parents can support the non-elites.

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Sports are a universal language. Across the globe, no matter where one goes, there will always be someone playing sports (Moore, 2022). Many people look back fondly on their sporting experience and tell stories of when they were playing in their childhood and early teen years. Even as people age, they transition from playing sports to watching sports and cheering on their children’s teams, the local high school and college, and for many, a professional team.

In their preferred sport, young athletes work to be the best and either thrive or falter compared to their peers. Early developers, identified as gifted athletes, are often selected first for the various teams and, by many, considered elite. But what happens to the late bloomers, the so-called “non-elite” athletes who do not make the team? Their skills did not get them selected and they, in many instances, cannot move on. As the opportunity of making the team narrows with age, non-elite athletes often get left behind and drop out of sport prematurely.

The remainder of this article explores several reasons why non-elite athletes get left behind and the actions coaches and parents can take to better include the non-elite.

Why Non-elites Get Left Behind

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The term elite is frequently overused in youth sports as some athletes get labeled elite at an early age, join elite teams, play in elite leagues, and compete in elite tournaments (O’Sullivan, 2015). But are these athletes, teams, leagues, and tournaments truly elite? The definition of elite is a select group that is superior in terms of ability and quality to the rest of a group of society (Oxford English Dictionary, 2023). How does one truly identify the elite athletes from a group of children 8, 9, or 10 years old?

More often than not, those identified as elite have simply played longer, matured earlier, run faster, or have better hand-eye or foot-eye coordination. In contrast, the late bloomers tend to get left behind. What follows are reasons why the non-elites do not get selected and why they find it difficult to advance in sports.

Early Developers

Every athlete can recall a teammate who peaked early and then disappeared and another athlete who came out of nowhere to become a star. The latter is commonly referred to as a “late bloomer.” Unfortunately for the late bloomers, youth sport tends to reward the early developers (Penwarden, 2023).

Early developers usually have greater strength, speed, and agility which gives them an advantage from the start. With these superior attributes, the early developers have the opportunity to work with better coaches, play on better fields, receive more recognition, get selected for all-star games, play in more prestige associations, and possibly get a college scholarship and make it to the big leagues (Feigley, 2020). The young athletes not deemed talented enough at ages 8 and 9 often feel discouraged, get left behind, and eventually quit sports.

Talent Identification, Selection, or Development

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In the past, the main purpose of youth sports was to develop athletes. Yet today it seems as if the main purpose is to select the children who appear to have the best skills. These “best” then receive favored treatment by playing more, getting more attention, and earning more recognition. Unfortunately, many youth coaches are not trained as coaches and fail to recognize what they are evaluating when they watch athletes perform. The more advanced athletes are quickly identified as having talent when in fact, they simply may have more experience or benefit from their birth date (see relative age effect).

It is easy for coaches to be so blinded by what a child can momentarily accomplish that they become oblivious to another child’s potential (Vaeyans et al., 2008). In youth sports, coaches must be cognizant of what players might achieve in the future rather than what a player can or cannot do presently. Many of those not selected come to believe they are not good enough and thus begin the self-fulfilling prophecy that they don’t belong. This weakness in talent assessment by coaches generally hurts more youngsters than it benefits.

Conflicting Wants

What athletes, parents, coaches, leagues, and communities want from youth sports is often in conflict. In many communities, youth sports have become an economic driver with the building of mega venues to host huge tournaments (Cook, 2022). Sport-enthusiast parents want their children to be successful in educational, social, and athletic domains. To achieve success in athletics, they enroll their children in sports at young ages to learn the game, master skills, and build character through the various aspects of training, practicing, and competing (Jayanthi et al., 2013). At the same time, many parents and guardians are living vicariously through their children and become enraptured with the success of their children (MacLelland, n.d.; Pappas, 2013).

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Many youth-level coaches put winning as their main focus (Borelli, 2023; Scavuzzo, 2016). As such, the coaches select athletes, typically the early developers, whom they believe are the most talented. Because teams can dress a limited number of athletes, those athletes who fall short in the skills required for their sport get cut or non-selected.

Children participate in sports for a variety of reasons, including to stay in shape, to be competitive, to learn new skills, and to be part of a team to name a few. However, the number one reason why children participate in sports is to have fun (Ewing & Seefeldt, 1989).

As our country obsesses about winning and being the best, an elitist model has been created that highlights success rather than enjoyment in athletics (Schwartz, 2012). For the non-elite, this model creates negative experiences that can lead to a lack of physical activity and organized sports over a child's lifetime. A growing focus on winning at a young age can lead to a range of issues including increased pressure on young athletes, burnout, and a loss of enjoyment in the sport (Brenner & Watson, 2024a). This culture can drive early specialization which may increase the risk of injuries and limit a child's exposure to a variety of physical and social experiences (Brenner & Watson, 2024b).

Travel Teams

Travel teams are teams that participate at a higher level than the normal community level. These teams often travel long distances and out of state to games, competitions, and tournaments. In most cases, these teams are affiliated with private or club sports programs, and not community, recreational, or school leagues. Travel teams are common in the team sports of basketball, soccer, baseball, softball, and volleyball.

Many believe that AAU basketball is one of the worst things to happen to youth sports (Elliott, 2022; Holmes, 2019; Kuehn, n.d.; Lee, 2019). Although AAU provides athletes with

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time on the court, better competition, visibility, and fun, it takes away much in terms of overall skill development. For example, there is little or no practice, a lack of focus on fundamental skills, questionable coaching, athlete burnout due to too much travel and too many games, high cost, lots of one-on-one play, too many “look at me” moments, and unfortunately, some travel team athletes don’t care much for their high school program.

These “special” teams exacerbate the problem of early specialization. Those athletes not selected for competitive travel teams abandon the sport prematurely, at an age when they should be enjoying the game and learning through play. There is a growing trend of young athletes being treated like professionals, subjected to rigorous training regimens, utilizing paid personal coaches, participating in sports throughout the year, and focusing on athletics as a means to secure college scholarships or professional opportunities (O’Sullivan, 2019). Such an approach to youth sports undermines athletes’ developmental and social advantages, leading to increased levels of stress and anxiety among youth sports participants.

Cost of Participation

The expense of participating in youth sports is significant, making it difficult for many families to afford. To play on these special teams the parents or guardians of the athletes have to pay participation fees (Parker, 2017). Additional costs include league fees, equipment, uniforms, travel for tournaments, and sometimes personal coaching and training.

Athletes who come from fortunate backgrounds can afford these fees, trips, and the equipment they need to play. Athletes who are not as fortunate are stuck, unless, of course, they are so good that the sponsored team provides them with a “scholarship”. This financial barrier often limits access to sports for lower-income families, reducing the opportunity to develop sports skills, and resulting in non-selection for teams.

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Youth sports have shifted from inclusive participation to a framework that is often driven by money (Parker, 2017). The typical American family spends about \$700 per year on their child's sports activities, but some parents shell out as much as \$35,000 annually to pay for lessons, camps, school sports fees, equipment, travel, and more. Because of this, sports are becoming increasingly divided by class status and income by their family. Lower-income families are being pushed out by rising prices, not by their children's unwillingness to play (Picchi, 2019). The current culture in youth sports has shifted how children participate and who gets to participate.

Decline in Participation

Children have been dropping out of youth sports at an alarming rate (Aspen Institute, 2020). The Aspen Institute found that the youth sports participation rate in team or individual sports for children ages 6-12 was about 72% in 2016. However, with a deeper look into the numbers, one finds that 84% of children from higher-income families (those making \$75,000/year or more) participated. In comparison, only 59% of children from lower-income families (making less than \$30,000/year) participated (Whitaker et al., n.d.). There is certainly a relationship between the cost of participation and the decline in participation

Making sports accessible and inclusive for all youth, including those with disabilities and those from various socio-economic backgrounds, remains a challenge. Efforts to promote diversity and inclusion in youth sports can be hindered by financial, cultural, and logistical barriers. According to the University of Michigan:

“Overall, 61% of children playing middle or high school sports were charged a pay-to-play fee. The average fee was \$93, according to the poll respondents, but 21% of children faced a pay-to-play fee of \$150 or more. However, pay-to-play fees are only one

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component of the school sports costs reported by parents. Including equipment, uniforms, and additional team fees, the average cost for a child's sports participation was \$381.”

(Parker, 2017, para 4).

In the US the churn rate, the percentage of children who stop playing a sport each year, exceeds 40-50% (Aspen Institute, 2023). The churn rate for tackle football is 27% and for basketball, 31%. Strand, et al. (2022) asked subjects to identify their most positive and negative experiences in youth sports and with their coaches. The positive aspects of youth sports were making friends, learning new things/skills, having fun, and being able to participate. The negative aspects were listed as coaches, competition level, and other kids/parents/coaches. The most positive aspects of coaches were relationships formed, encouragement and praise, and being supportive and trustworthy. The negative aspects of coaches were spotlighting, yelling/screaming/bad attitude, and picking favorites.

Actions to Support the Non-elites

As you have read, those who possess extraordinary skills get to play, but others are turned away. So what happens to the children who do not make the team? In what way can parents and coaches encourage these children, the late bloomers, whose skills are still developing? How can parents and coaches protect an athlete's love for a sport and celebrate their abilities when they do not make “the cut”?

Participation in sports creates an opportunity that offers multiple benefits to a person's physical, social, and emotional well-being (Malm et al., 2019). With fun being the number one reason why youngsters play sports, coaches and parents need to focus on developing task and skill mastery rather than focusing on simply beating the other team and winning the league championship (Farrey, 2008). Youth sports coaches need to implement a positive youth

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development approach, place an emphasis on skill development, foster free play and sports sampling. They must also understand the relative age effect and put athletes first and place mere winning at a distant second.

Implement a Positive Youth Development Approach

A positive youth development framework promotes developing the strengths of youths by building on assets using a nurturing philosophy (Arthur et al, 2023). A positive youth development model is focused on the five C's of competence, confidence, connection, character, and compassion (Lerner et al., 2011). Engagement in sports involves learning sport-specific skills and life skills. Modeling and reinforcing healthy, positive skills and behaviors by adult coaches should serve as the roadmap for helping youth learn, develop, and foster life skills.

Instead of being harshly punitive or enacting some type of punishment for mistakes, coaches using positive youth development are more likely to instruct, calm, and demonstrate how to respond in emotionally healthier manners (Newman et al., 2021). Youth sports should provide a context in which children learn adaptive ways of coping, the value of effort, lessons of success and failure, and self-efficacy beliefs that provide a foundation for motivation and well-being (Strand et al., 2019).

Emphasis on Skill Development

Placing importance on skill development is the foundation for catering to non-elite athletes. If an athlete does not make the team due to a lack of skill, it does not mean they are inferior or should be treated as such. Rather, it simply means the individual needs to hone and develop their skills. The competence motivation theory states that children will persist in activities in which they feel competent and are at risk of withdrawing from activities in which they have low perceptions of physical abilities (Harter, 1978).

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Regardless of talent level, all athletes should feel successful at what they are doing. Coaches can practice skills in a variety of game-like settings, and parents can work with the same skills at home. This builds player and parent/coach relationships while working toward task and skill mastery and ultimately, self-efficacy, the situational-specific form of self-confidence (Block, 2010). Working toward mastering talent and having the confidence to perform the skills will inspire young athletes to continue to be physically active in sports throughout their lives.

Foster Free Play and Sport Sampling

Skill development is foundational to catering to non-elite athletes and can be enhanced by reintroducing free play and sport sampling. According to the Aspen Institute (2019), free play is a foundational experience, a child-directed playing space that rewards expression, fosters social skills, and demands some degree of inclusion. This free play gives children the opportunity to pick up games on their own accord, better their skills, and learn the game they love in a social setting. Free play allows athletes to explore, use their imaginations, and engage their decision-making skills without interference from coaches. Free play will create what is called “field sense” or “game sense.”

For instance, a group of 15 youngsters meet ritually at their city’s park for a pick-up game of touch football; all members know how to play the game, and teams are consistently changed up, but the same old monotony persists with one football. Consider that four of those 15 individuals recognize the opportunity for something new; they decide to teach the remaining members how to play simple sevens touch rugby by switching the direction in which the ball is passed (among several other rules). In this instance, the free-play scenario introduces a new game to the people may have never known rugby before.

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Free play also creates the possibility of learning new games through sports sampling. Sport sampling, or sport diversification, is trying several different sports at a young age. Sport sampling allows young athletes to develop different strengths. Engaging in multiple sports allows athletes to develop different leadership skills because within each sport one is allowed to play different roles (Cote et al., 2009).

Understand the Relative Age Effect

Because athletic success involves multiple factors, including genetics, mental attitude, access to training, and money, attempts to predict future success based on one's skill level at age nine or ten are likely to be futile (Brady, 2004). An early study that followed athletes for 12 years found that 45% were elementary school stars but not junior high school stars, 30% were junior high school stars but not elementary school stars, and only one-quarter were both elementary and junior high school stars. In essence, three out of every four stars in elementary school were not stars by the time they reached junior high school (Clarke, 1958).

The relative age effect refers to a phenomenon in which children born in, or close to, a critical age cut-off period may have an advantage in athletic and academic endeavors (Green 2023). Numerous studies have shown that individuals born in the early quartiles of a given year are more likely to persevere in sports, by being able to actively dominate in physical bouts and key performance measures (Fumarco et al., 2017; Geithner et al., 2018; Gerdin et al., 2018; Jones et al., 2018; Stracciolini et al., 2016). On some teams some athletes are likely to be almost one year older than some of their younger teammates.

The relative age effect tends to even out after the age of 17. But even before that age, many late bloomers have dropped out (Miner, 2016). Because it is difficult to know who will become the later stars, it is important to keep the talent pool as large as possible for as long as

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possible. Understanding the relative age effect and knowing the birth dates of all team members helps coaches better understand why some kids appear to be early bloomers and other late developers.

Put Athletes First

The last step in supporting non-elite athletes requires coaches and parents to answer one central question: What is more important - winning first or athletes first (Fraser-Thomas & Côté, 2006)? If coaches and parents put winning on a pedestal, their athletes and children will feel ashamed or unworthy when they fail. Putting athletes first starts at home and continues into practice and game-like situations. One example of how parents can show their support regardless of wins or losses is by using the simple phrase, “I loved watching you play” (O’Sullivan, 2014).

Coaches, friends, and family of young athletes can follow suit and offer praise by saying things such as, “It looked like you were having fun”. They could focus on the effort put forth by saying, “You sure played hard today.” Positive reinforcement places importance on the experience rather than winning and being the best.

Summary

Parents enroll their children in sports at a young age for a variety of reasons. Through their respective sports seasons, young athletes will work to master game skills and knowledge. Some will be selected and make the team, but many will not. Those who make the team continue and are celebrated in the unintentional elitist model created by society. Those who do not make the team ask, “What now”? As the opportunity of making the team narrows with age, parents and coaches need to determine how to engage non-elite athletes.

It is well established that young children in sports are more proactive, more socially aware, driven in other aspects of life, and typically perform better academically compared to

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children who do not partake. Numerous studies have laid out the numerous benefits to emotional and mental well-being by playing sports. Further, if young athletes enjoy participating in sports, they are likely to continue enjoying sports in their adult life.

Understanding why and how the current US youth sports model provides limited opportunities for non-elite athletes is a start to making changes. Once that is understood, coaches need to find ways to keep the non-elites engaged. The big challenge for administrators of youth sports programs is changing the way society views and thinks about youth sports. Parents and coaches cannot set unrealistic demands on children to excel early and then expect those children to respond appropriately. While some of the early developers and truly gifted individuals might benefit from the “win-first” approach, it does not outweigh the disservice parents and coaches are giving to non-elite athletes. These children and adolescents, not winning, must come first.

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