

# Participant/athlete development

## Show me the evidence!

There have been numerous studies on various aspects of participant/athlete development, particularly in the last five years. The results of these studies highlight four main areas of thoughts:

### The pathway is different for all - so we must cater for this

- Evidence suggests individuals take varying pathways as they move from lower levels of performance to elite performance<sup>i</sup>.
- In fact, most participants/athletes don't follow a predictable development path.
- One study in particular found only 16.4% of athletes followed a predictable pathway, whereas 83.6% of athletes followed a diverse pathway<sup>ii</sup>.
- NZ international athletes are similar. A study on NZ international athletes found their development pathways to becoming elite athletes are diverse<sup>iii</sup>.

### We need to understand young people and their development

- Young people's development can be unpredictable and their behaviour often illogical.
- They are in a period of continual change and developing at varying rates and are all at different stages of maturity.
- Athlete development is characterised by unpredictable jumps and slumps that can impact on performance. It's not a predictable straightforward linear process<sup>iv</sup>.
- Research evidence has clearly shown that at a youth level, it is often the early developer (the taller, bigger, stronger kid) who is selected over the late developer<sup>v</sup>.
- However, it doesn't always stay like this when everything evens out when they become adults!
- Many are viewed as talented as a youth, then suddenly not talented or able to maintain this advantage in the long-term – when their development is finished and everything evens out<sup>vi</sup>.
- A large amount of evidence has shown there is a distinct lack of transition from youth performance to elite adult performance<sup>vii</sup>.
- One study found only 7% of athletes transition from being identified as a youth to being an elite adult<sup>viii</sup>.
- During the adolescent years, research has told us it's important to not "write anyone off" as things can change pretty dramatically over a short period of time<sup>ix</sup>.

### A focus on winning is not the best approach

- An emphasis on winning has shown older, more physically mature participants get selected in preference to younger, less physically able participants<sup>x</sup>.
- Research has also demonstrated adult behaviors affect children's enjoyment of sport – with a focus on winning and competition – appearing to serve the needs of adults more than the needs of children<sup>xi</sup>.
- We need to keep at the centre that Kiwi kids play sport to:
  - have fun
  - play with friends
  - learn new skills
  - be fit and healthy<sup>xii</sup>.
- An observation from Wayne Goldsmith on Australian sport... A focus on winning often comes at the expense of a child's enjoyment and continued participation. Where sports are continuing to offer inflexible, performance-focused sporting products, kids and parents are leaving<sup>xiii</sup>.

# Early specialisation is a myth

- Research is pretty clear here – early selection/identification and early specialisation is just not the best way!
- Research evidence continues to illustrate that early specialisation practices struggle to appropriately develop future elite athletes and can be detrimental to the long-term health and well-being of our young people, resulting in an increased rate of burnout and drop-out<sup>xiv</sup>.
- Early selection and specialisation:
  - causes a very high turnover from youth level to senior level
  - the younger the athlete in the programme, the younger they exit
  - but later age of recruitment results in a higher level of adult success!<sup>xv</sup>
- In fact, a considerable amount of evidence has demonstrated that many athletes who play a range of sports as a youth achieve an elite level of performance in sport<sup>xvi</sup>.
- Deliberate play, unstructured play and game-based practice in short timeframes are more appropriate approaches with young athletes<sup>xvii</sup>.
- Our NZ international athletes also demonstrate this. A study on NZ international athletes found:
  - most played a range of different sports as a teenager
  - with some not taking up the sport they excel in until their teenage years<sup>xviii</sup>.
- Also our Pathway to Podium (P2P) athletes:
  - played on average 3 sports at High / Secondary School (2.9 sports)
  - 96% P2P athletes have specialised by 18 years
  - 50% (biggest percentage) at 15 / 16 years, only 15% at 14 years.

**For more information on the Sport NZ Talent Plan, *Balance is Better*, and the consultation and supporting research please visit [www.sportnz.org.nz/talent](http://www.sportnz.org.nz/talent)**

## References

- <sup>i</sup> Araújo, Fonseca, Davids, Garganta, Volossovitch, Brandão, & Krebs, 2010; Bergeron, Mountjoy, Armstrong, et al., 2015; Phillips, Davids, Renshaw, & Portus, 2010.
- <sup>ii</sup> Gulbin, Oldenziel, Weissensteiner, & Gagne, 2013.
- <sup>iii</sup> Hodge, Pierce, Taylor, & Button, 2012.
- <sup>iv</sup> Abbott, Button, Pepping, & Collins, 2005; Bergeron, Mountjoy, Armstrong et al., 2015; Coble, Schorer, & Baker, 2012.
- <sup>v</sup> Coble, Baker, Wattie, & McKenna 2009; McCarthy & Collins, 2014.
- <sup>vi</sup> Baker, Schorer, & Coble, 2012; Meylan, Cronin, Oliver, & Hughes, 2010.
- <sup>vii</sup> Bergeron, Mountjoy, Armstrong et al., 2015; Brown, 2001; Hollings, Mallett & Hume, 2014; Lloyd, Oliver, Faigenbaum, Howard, De Ste Croix, Williams...Myer, 2015; Pankhurst & Collins, 2013.
- <sup>viii</sup> Gulbin, Oldenziel, Weissensteiner, & Gagne, 2013.
- <sup>ix</sup> Martindale & Mortimer, 2011.
- <sup>x</sup> Lewis, Morgan, & Cooper, 2015; Till, Coble, O'Hara, Chapman, & Cooke, 2010.
- <sup>xi</sup> Walters, Schluter, Thomson, & Payne, 2011.
- <sup>xii</sup> AUT Research.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Goldsmith, 2017.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Pankhurst & Collins, 2013; Renshaw, Davids, Phillips, & Kerhervé. 2012; Strachan, Côté & Deakin, 2009).
- <sup>xv</sup> Güllich, 2012, 2014.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Coutinho, Mesquita, & Fonseca, 2016.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Pankhurst & Collins, 2013.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Hodge, Pierce, Taylor, & Button, 2012.

