



Childhood To Champion Athlete,

by Tudor Bompa - Tudor Bompa is known to many as the man who single-handedly revolutionized Western training methods

The first experience in a sport is critical for the ongoing development of any athlete. If the experience is positive, the child will likely continue participating. If the experience is negative, the young participant may drop out of the sport, and lose interest in physical activity.

Many children now have their first sporting experience in organized competition. Children, as young as four years of age, often participate in structured leagues, or Mini Soccer tournaments where there are formalized rules and referees, official team kits, and winning is the primary objective.

There is a great deal of support, from a variety of adults, for organized competitive sports for children. Many individuals believe that it is important for children to experience winning and losing, and that organized sports provide a forum for children to develop values and skills that will help them later in life. Although there is some merit to this perspective, there are many psychological demands on children, which can have an adverse effect on their growth and development, and may prevent potential world champions from optimally developing their talent.

PUTTING WINNING INTO PERSPECTIVE

Children love to compete!

This is a known fact for anyone in child education, including physical education and sports. The influence of sports on their daily lives is profound. Children are greatly influenced by their coach, who often may become their role model, as well as by top athletes in their sport, who are their heroes. Therefore, the influence sports have on children is not to be taken lightly.

Children are very athletically minded, and as such, many of them participate in sports. According to recent studies on the topic, 45% of 10 year olds participate in sports! However, as they grow older, almost half of them drop out of sports (at the age of 18 only 26% stay active).

One of the most frequently asked questions about children and sport is:

"To be a world champion, is it important to win a lot during childhood?"

The answer is, 'NO'.

To expect potential world champions to be winners from an early age, is like expecting a business to be extremely profitable from its first month of operation.

Similarity to business, if a solid foundation is not developed during early years, the chances of being successful for a long period of time are drastically reduced. If winning is emphasized, there is much more likelihood that a solid foundation will not be developed, and that children will experience a variety of problems, both physical and psychological.

EMPHASIZING SKILL DEVELOPMENT

If we are really interested in developing talented athletes, it is essential for us to de-emphasize winning in sports programs for children, and emphasize skill development

If winning is emphasized, children are often placed into situations that are too stressful for adequately developing skill. As a result, they are often reinforcing, and further developing, skills that are technically incorrect.

The best way for children to develop skills is to practice them in a fun, non-stressful, non-threatening environment. This type of environment seldom exists within competitive sports programs. In most cases, children are competing too frequently and, as a result, they have difficulty finding the necessary time to practice the skills that will help them become better athletes.

In some leagues, such as football, where young children are expected to compete in as many as 30 games in a season, very little time is allotted to skill development. During each game, the children are applying, not developing, their skills in order to win. If children have not properly developed their skills prior to application in a game, they will be reinforcing poor technique and, unquestionably, developing some bad habits.

Once bad technical habits have been developed, they are very difficult to correct. If children are not provided with opportunities to develop skills properly before they are pressured to apply them in a competitive environment, they will likely develop skills that may be suitable for success at that particular stage of development, but not suitable for higher levels of competition.

For example, if a coach/manager wants to develop a top notch 10 year old defender, he/she may spend time working on the boy/girl learning clearing the ball from defense. This will certainly provide the young player's team with opportunities for success as 10 year olds, but when the boys/girls become 14, he/she will likely have poor defensive technical knowledge. Because he/she did not learn the appropriate techniques properly when he/she was younger, he/she will not have developed a strong fundamental technical base because he/she spent far too much time as a young player practicing hoofing the ball.

As a result, the young player may become discouraged when he/she starts losing, matches or personal battles, as a 14 year old because other boys/girls are much better at performing fundamental techniques that are necessary for foot balling success, such as the basic defensive position and playing the ball from defense.

MULTI-SKILL DEVELOPMENT

In addition to developing fundamental skills for a specific sport, it is important for young children to develop a variety of skills that will help them become good general athletes, before they start training in a specific sport.

This form of preparation for sports, often referred to as multi-skill development, is common in Eastern European countries. In some countries, children attend sports schools where they participate in a basics training program. At these schools, children develop fundamental sport skills such as running, jumping, throwing, catching, tumbling, and balancing.

In addition to becoming extremely coordinated, the skills that children learn are fundamental to success in a variety of individual and team sports, such as track and field, basketball, and soccer. In most of the programs, there is also a swimming component. Swimming helps children develop their aerobic capacities, while minimizing the physical stresses on their bodies, particularly in the joints.

If we encourage children to develop a variety of skills, they will probably experience success in a number of sporting activities. As a result, many children will be interested in continuing their participation in sports and physical activity, and some children will have the inclination and desire to specialize and further develop their sports talent.

It is important for us to provide children who are interested in further developing their talent with the necessary guidance and opportunities. It takes years of training to become a world class level athlete. We must provide athletes who are striving for excellence with a systematic, long-term training plan that is based on sound, scientific principles.

WHY DO CHILDREN DROP OUT OF SPORTS?

As children grow older many of them drop out of sports. Why?

According to Ewing and Seefeldt (1990), the most important reasons children stop playing are as follows:

- I lost interest.
- I was not having fun.
- It took too much time.
- Coach was a poor teacher.
- Too much pressure.
- Wanted more sport activity.
- I was tired of it.
- Needed more study time.
- Coach played favorites.
- Sport was boring.
- Over-emphasis on winning.

However, if some changes could take place in our perception on sports, winning and general attitude towards why children participate in sports, many children could get involved again. A child would participate in sports again, if:

- Practices were more fun.
- They could play more.
- Coaches understood players better.
- There was no conflict with social life.
- Coaches were better teachers.

Certainly, motivation for involvement in sports is not the same for all students at all ages. Studies show individuals who shown interest in staying involved in sports have three motivational reasons for doing so:

1. Reluctant participants: About 25% of the subjects responded that they "had to" be in sports because of outside pressure, mostly parents and peers. These individuals were less than willing to play and practice hard, and as such, likely to be candidates to dropout from sports - outside pressure, mostly parents & peers.

2. Image conscious socializer: 40% of the total seem to draw their motivation from rewards and approval of others. These young athletes are successful in sports, looking-good physically, and in good shape. However, if outside reinforcement may diminish, they are likely to quit sports.

3. Competence oriented: A group of athletes is made of individuals whose main motivation factor is to improve their skills. The remaining 35% are the individuals who enjoy practicing and playing hard, who will most likely make sports a life-long interest.

To improve the motivation of young people to stay involved in sports those interested in the subject should know that:

- Fun is essential. If children do not have fun they will not stay in sports.
- Skill development is a key element of fun.
- Sports participation should lead to self-knowledge.