

Transcript

Michael Johnson on early childhood specialisation

MICHAEL JOHNSON:

David, I want to get your opinion on early specialization in sport. Because I see it as a big problem in this country, where parents feel that the earlier I get my kid involved in a particular sport, the more time they're going to have to develop this incredible amount of skill.

DAVID EPSTEIN:

Yeah, so I think the burgeoning body of science in this area suggesting that that early hyperspecialization is not good in a number of ways. Now it might get you the best 10-year-old. But it's not the strategy to get you the best 20-year-old for a number of reasons. One, the earlier you pick, especially prepuberty, you're more likely to put the wrong person in the wrong sport. You're also more likely to put them psychologically in the wrong sport, right? It takes, no matter how gifted you are now, for the most part, it takes a heck of a lot of commitment to get to the very top level because there are other really talented people more committed. And if you have someone in the wrong psychological fit, I think it's not very likely they're going to make it that far.

PROFESSOR HESPEI:

We have been very involved in elite cycling for many years in track and field. And you definitely see that if young kids, you start to specialize them at a very young age, in the end, they lose the enjoyment of sports. And if at the age of 16, 17, kids don't have fun anymore in sports, they will never become an athlete.

LAWRENCE OKOYE:

I had great experiences playing rugby. I had great experiences playing soccer, football. I had great experiences doing track. I had great experiences with my friends playing all kinds of sport. And you know, those things will never go away. And that's contributed to the athlete that I am today. You know, maybe I wouldn't be as athletic or you know, as physically capable as I am now if I hadn't done all the other stuff in the past.

LIZZY YARNOLD, MBE:

Growing up, I learned a lot from taking part in loads of different sports. Not only in athletics, doing lots of different events. But the fact that you were doing different sports, I mean, I wasn't getting bad tennis elbow. It means that my back wasn't sore from the javelin. It meant that I could always have a rest and recovery for all of the different injuries. And also by the time I got to skeleton, you know, my body was kind of fresh into that movement pattern. So it wasn't something that I'd overpracticed, and something that I'd got into bad habits with.

PROFESSOR HESPEI:

The danger is that you would always use the body in exactly the same way, using the same muscle with the same metabolic profile. And the chance to create an overload in a kid is much greater when you specialize than when you present a variety of exercise modes that make him develop as an athlete. And most of the overuse injuries occur because of very specific training at too young age.

DAVID EPSTEIN:

Study after study is coming out now that while elite athletes do train more than sub elite athletes, they actually train less early on. And then in the mid-teen years, usually cross over. And before that, they have what's called a sampling period. So I think Roger Federer is a great example of this. His parents, I think, could be described as pully, not pushy. They said, you can't focus on tennis yet. You have to play soccer, basketball, badminton before you can focus on tennis.

And it looks like the kids who have become athletes first, learned a range of skills both the complex, neurological skills, like anticipating objects, as well as just developing body awareness, ultimately then pick up any subsequent sports skill more rapidly and are a lot less injury-prone and have the chance to find a sport that they might actually be motivated to do for a decade.

I mean, I think there are multiple pathways to success. And some athletes, whether they're diversified or specialized, are going to make it for a variety of reasons, physiological and mental. Golf, I think, the jury's out. Hyperspecialization early may, in fact, be better. Most sports, I think, the evidence is pushing toward, it's not as good. You know, the earlier you push selection, the more likely you are to put the wrong person in the wrong sport. So I think there are advantages, but we've overdone it in early selection.

[MUSIC PLAYING]