Dr Jean Côté is Director of Queen’s University’s School of Kinesiology and Health Studies in Kingston, Canada. The eminent researcher has delivered more than 50 keynote presentations at major national and international conferences. He returned to England in March to add to that tally. And we had a front-row seat.

What a privilege it was to listen to world-renowned academic Dr Jean Côté at The Open University’s fourth annual Sport and Fitness Conference in Milton Keynes.

I can’t have been alone in feeling like Charlie did when he chanced upon his golden ticket, gifting him the opportunity to hear all the mouth-watering secrets of the master chocolatier. Only this time, it was the research pioneer who held court in front of a rapt audience.

Still, for the 100-plus delegates from six countries who attended, it was the equivalent of the kid being given the key to the sweet shop.

And while Dr Côté’s vast and varied programme of research on coaching, children in sport, sporting expertise and positive youth development is not classified information, to be treated to a portion of his work was the cherry on top of a wonderful two days’ learning.

Dr Côté used his keynote address to sound an emphatic warning to coaches and sports organisations of the dangers of focusing on elite performance and prioritising children’s long-term success at the expense of their immediate enjoyment.

Adhering to the fundamental principles of youth sport development advocated by Dr Côté will help coaches build competence, confidence, connection and character in their participants over a single season. When repeated over multiple seasons, increased participation, positive personal development and improved performance success will be sure to follow.

Designing sports systems that neglect over 99% of the population in favour of the fewer than 1% who might go on to achieve elite level status is becoming pervasive. Such single-minded preoccupation with long-term success can have wide-ranging and damaging implications, argued Dr Côté – not least a drop-off in participation, stymied personal development and, contrary to the expectations of those system builders, reduced chances of performance success.
Sport as part of an interconnected system

We were given a crash course in human development theory.

The dynamic interaction of activities, people and settings has a crucial impact on youth sport development, Dr Côté told delegates.

But equally, there are many other settings that impact on children’s lives. So just as sport provides a vast and valuable set of assets and skills, so activities that children engage in outside of sport, that are governed by the same values, will also complement their personal development.

It is these interconnecting experiences, relationships and environments that shape who we are and who we will become.

Now, imagine a child is subjected to a particularly bad experience of sport. It follows that this could have a potentially detrimental impact on their long-term personal development inside and outside of sport.

We were given a frightening glimpse (albeit an extreme example) of what this looks like through the convenient medium of YouTube, and two polar opposite videos of young children engaged in sport from across the Pond.

One provided an adult’s perspective of sport: a coach-driven win at all costs session of American Football for seven and eight-year-olds (“Rip their freakin’ heads off and let them bleed” is one of the more outrageous expressions from a coach in serious danger of bursting a blood vessel).

The other provided a child’s perspective: a four-year-old budding ice hockey player recreating Bambi on Ice. His spontaneous fun at all costs approach to playing sport, and adorable persistence, saw him squeeze the maximum amount of pleasure from one session (“Watch out everyone! … OWWwww … I can crawwwwwl!”).

‘What do children involved in sport at that age want at all costs?’ Dr Côté asked rhetorically after the highly amusing ice show. We all answered in unison in our heads before the word had even left his lips … FUN!

Here is the video showing the Texas Youth Football Association’s style of coaching (part of US reality TV series Friday Night Tykes).

And here is the YouTube video of the young mic’d up ice hockey player. Will he be the new Wayne Gretzky? He’s four, who cares!
Ask kids what they want

The former served as a prime example of what can happen when coaches lose perspective of the fundamental principles of youth development and persist with their skewed version that treats children as mini adults, displaying behaviour and attitudes inappropriate for their participants’ age and stage of development.

‘We need to think how we can reconcile those two perspectives. Rarely do we consult with the kids to ask for their viewpoint,’ said Dr Côté, who, having laid the foundation, set about expanding on his framework of sport as a mix of different systems, contexts and influences.

‘It is the interaction of these over time [that] will determine the impact that sport can have on immediate, short-term and long-term development.

‘And as well as long-term outcomes, coaches need to think about adding outcomes that are short-term and immediate.’

The American football coach was thinking about the long-term outcomes but not the immediate outcomes (about how the kids might feel after practice). Fun didn’t just take a back seat, it wasn’t allowed a seat at all.

Setting the wheels in motion

Dr Côté’s development model [Côté Turnmidge & Evans, 2014; Vierimaa, Turner, Bruner & Côté’s, 2017], shows these three layers of influence as gears, or cogs, that interact with one another: The Dynamic Elements that power the whole process.

It works on the premise that ‘sport is basically what you do, with who and where’.

Personal Engagement in Activities is the ‘what you do’: the activities, the drills, the games. ‘This is the central element of sport. Sport doesn’t exist without them,’ said Dr Côté.

The Quality Social Dynamics is the ‘with who’: ‘the relationships, peer interaction, the hopes and fears and the excitement this brings. It is a very strong determinant of what is going to happen in terms of the outcomes of the experience of sport.’

And Appropriate Settings is the ‘where it’s done’: the physical environment, the number of players, the type of drill, size of pitch and so on.

When the three cogs run like clockwork (and remember there will need to be adaptations made over time depending on the participants’ age and stage of development), they create an ‘immediate experience’ and directly influence the Personal Assets, which are essentially the positive consequences of the chain reaction.

‘So in terms of the three working together to create an immediate experience, for the American footballers, it was likely not a positive one,’ said Dr Côté. ‘And so over time you will probably see a drop off in terms of participation and performance outcomes.’
A turn for the better

Time for another analogy, and a second nostalgic nod to 70s popular culture.

Dr Côté’s cog model triggered some childhood memories. Those of a certain age will remember the vertical board game Downfall that every child who grew up in the 70s and 80s seemed to own – sat on the same shelf as their other Christmas present classics: Mousetrap, Operation, Kerplunk and Buckaroo.

In this game of skill and strategy, counters were placed inside slotted dials and players had to move them down through the network of cogs until the discs fell into the tray at the bottom. The winner was the player who got all their counters into the tray the fastest.

Dr Côté’s system also requires correct alignment of cogs to maintain momentum. In this case the journey is one of player development and is destined to end in disappointment and dropout (participation as opposed to counters into a tray) if coaches make the wrong turn or miss making a turn (intervention) completely.

Player progress is a process, which requires forethought and strategy. To be successful, coaches cannot skip levels, or layers. Coaches who think they can (like the Texas Youth Football Association coaches) are actually plotting their own and, worse, their participants’ downfall.

‘While it’s important to think long term, it is also important to remember that kids do not think long term,’ said Dr Côté, who believes that if you concentrate on the short-term gains, the long-term gains will naturally follow.

‘If I’m an effective coach, and I have a bunch of kids for one season, I should be developing them in terms of those 4 Cs.’ Those being:

- **Competence**: They should be better players at the end of the season than when they started, having learnt new sport-specific skills.
- **Confidence**: They should be more confident in their ability to play the sport, with an internal sense of positive self-worth.
- **Connection**: They should have struck up a good relationship with their fellow team members and coach.
- **Character**: They should have learnt respect for the rules, sportsmanship, integrity and empathy for others.

‘Repeated over multiple seasons the 3 Ps (participation, performance and personal development) will just happen, and you will get better performers and better people.’
Dynamic Elements: A layered approach

There are additional layers of complexity attached to this development system.

Each sub-level in the structure is bound by common elements including:

1. Diversity as an important element of ‘Personal Engagement in Activities’
2. Making athletes feel that they are important and what they do is important is an essential element of ‘Quality Social Dynamics’
3. Size, density, and or proximity are key elements of ‘Appropriate Settings.’

So, taking the wheel of ‘Personal Engagement in Activities’ as an example, it is important that coaches consider how they can maintain their participants’ interest through diversity – which is tied to motivation, enjoyment and deliberate practice.

‘If the kids lose interest in the sport then you have lost their engagement and their desire to invest into whatever initially triggered their positive feelings and positive emotional attachment,’ said Dr Côté.

‘When they design practice, coaches should keep in mind to create that situational interest by providing a diverse environment that will contain triggers that will allow participants to experience those positive emotions on a daily basis.’

The ‘Complementary Physical Activities’ layer, meanwhile, relates to the benefits of sampling different sports (diversity of activities between sports), while ‘Complementary Activities’ refers to diversity of activities outside sport – devoting time and effort to other hobbies and interests like painting, playing a musical instrument, going to Scouts or Guides, socialising with friends in the park or at a youth club, playing video games, watching TV and so on.

You can add further layers of diversity too. So within sports, you can have activities designed by adults and those designed by participants, and you can have diversity of play (fun, spontaneous games) and practice (skill acquisition drills and games-based learning methods). A coach, for example, could sprinkle the ‘gold dust’ of diversity on this layer by utilising different small-sided games to work on tactical improvements or participants’ technical skills, for example.

It seems variety really is the spice of life and Dr Côté’s advice to coaches is to embed diversity as a central component of your coaching philosophy.

Central to the 'Quality Social Dynamics cog' is the idea that transformational coaching is person-centred coaching.

And if you take the ‘Appropriate Settings’ cog, then the size (of a club, a league, the town or city where you live, the field or training area), density (number of players compared to number of coaches) and proximity of a setting (accessibility of the club or the facilities) will all influence athlete outcomes, says Dr Côté.

Remember: Positive immediate experiences

With just one hour at his disposal, there was only time to skim the surface of his decades of dedicated research but, in conclusion, he emphasised the following point: ‘EVERYTHING children do is important’.

It is a coach’s role, he continued, to recognise and apply these recommended guiding principles in their
practice and, with every twist of the cog and within every layer, look to add their own stamp of creativity.

Organisations too should learn to embrace and implement these fundamental principles and understand that their positive interventions can have an influence on a multitude of variables and different outcomes.

‘Creating positive immediate experiences for kids and delivering those 4 Cs should be the focus of youth sport programmes,’ concluded Dr Côté, adding that this could only happen if coaches valued the person as well as the performer.

‘Coaches should be focusing not on elite performance but the development of the person. You should care about the person first and make kids feel good about what they are doing.’

Willy Wonka invented the everlasting gobstopper. Well, this magic formula Dr Jean Côté helped design through evidence-based research holds the secret to giving participants the best chance of success and happiness, in life as well as in sport. And it is something coaches would do well to chew over.

Next steps

If you are interested in learning more about youth sports development, UK Coaching has a number of workshops that may be of interest, including:

- Coaching Children (5–12)
- Coaching the Person in Front of You

For further reading, check out UK Coaching’s video and guide to the C System:

- Understanding the C System Model
- The C System Explained

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