

# **‘The Race to the Bottom’ and ‘Keeping up with the Joneses’ – A nightmare mix for parents and coaches**

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Across many children’s lives there is an increasing pressure and a competitive race to reach the top at the youngest ages not just on the sports field but also musically and academically. A potential ‘arms race’ built on the needs of adults and fuelled by money, success and a misheld belief in much publicised myths such as completing the 10,000 hours will guarantee the type of success a child should be craving.

Many children did not sign up to this type of life or in fact are being given a choice. As parents of course we do need to steer and we do need to have some ambition for our children (that is human nature right?) but at what point does that potentially become an unhealthy obsession?

Childhood should be an enjoyable experience with limited amounts of pressure, room for individuals to grow into their own skin and a time for them to learn to start making some independent decisions about the things that they wish to pursue that are important to them. Unfortunately, many are being driven by the needs and priorities of the adults around them including parents.

## **Why?**

Much of society now relies on instant gratification as opposed to long term gratification. Of course children who put in hundreds of hours of practise are going to be better on the whole than a child who has not. As a result, we see the best 8 year old sportsmen and women, the child who always has the best part in the play or the child who steals the show at the school music concerts. BUT I ask you this question, ‘By their late teens, how many of these children are still participating or operating at the level that they showed as a young child?’

The answer is probably not very many. In a sporting context it is difficult to explain to parents that in the long term a better foundation built on lots of different sporting activity has a far greater chance of lending itself to greater sporting success in the teenage years and adulthood. Yes, we can show them research that multi-sport performers are now overtaking the early specialising peers in many instances, but parents still fear the early selection process.

With English football clubs offering training for players as young as 4 and 5, signing players at the age of 9 as an example it is no surprise that parents feel the pressure of this environment. Many teams in the USA are selected at a young age, huge amounts of travelling becomes part and parcel of life and parents are missold the dream of professional sport and the potential of college scholarships.

Many parents have to buy into the process whether they like it or not as they are told by coaches and administrators that they are not giving their children the best shot if they don’t.

**‘The Race to the Bottom’** is more prevalent than ever before with more early selection processes taking place, although it has been great to see some of the stances most recently taken by organisations(USA Hockey)springs to mind, in distancing themselves from this method. Even a couple of weeks ago we were handed an article showing two year olds competing in an event known as the ‘Bahrain Baby Olympics’. A good friend of mine pointed out to me that in the current race to the bottom we will be making predictions on children’s sporting ability whilst the children are still in the mother’s womb.

Although we are a long way from that, it is no surprise that parents feel huge amounts of pressure just to follow suit and are led by the environments in front of them.

For example, I have spoken with many parents who tell me their child only likes one sport? My reply is often, 'how many have they tried?' In many cases not very many and actually even getting parents to understand having a break in the season can be hard work.

The reason – they fear the impact it may have on their child's so called chosen sport, whether their child will be selected or overtaken by another child in the process.

Some children are playing more of the same sport for more months of the year than professionals and the implications of this could be catastrophic? (Burnout, boredom, repetitive stress injuries, missing out on family occasions to name a few).

Of course some high performing athletes may have come through this type of model and some parents believe that it can work for them. The success of the 'Williams Sisters' again is popularised in the media but for every Venus and Serena how many have failed and been left to pick up the pieces both physically and mentally from this type of upbringing.

### **So what is holding parents back from making well thought out long term decisions?**

To fail to “**keep up with the Joneses**” is perceived as demonstrating socio-economic or cultural inferiority. Showing that their child is better gives them this boost and also allows them to feel justified in giving their child the very best opportunities.

As parents we love seeing our children do well, we love other parents telling us how good our child is and we love the fact that come the weekend our child may be stealing the show with their performances. Which parent would not enjoy this? It comes back to this instant gratification in the here and now...

Parents feel under so much pressure to compare their children with other children rather than treat them as individuals and that can often lead to them making some rash decisions.

### **How have we got to this stage?**

Undoubtedly, parents feel social pressure as well as parental peer pressure and parents need to be able to justify to themselves that they have given their child every chance. Which parent would not want to try and do this? As we have said before on this site, all parents love their children and are well intentioned in what they do. We just need to try and channel this commitment and emotion in more productive, longer term, well thought out ways.

Some sporting organisations and coaches attitudes do not always help either. Many parents feel that to get the best coaches, the best facilities and the best opportunities they need to be in the top group from day 1. This is a very difficult case to argue if taking a shorter term view. It is also very difficult to argue to parents when they see two standards of coaching session going on, the weaker players then having a worse experience with a less experienced or perhaps not as capable coach. Of course they are going to do all that they can to get their children into the perceived higher group.

How many organisations can honestly say that they set up in a way that they could prove and justify what they do to give all young players equal opportunities and chances to develop?

The Icelandic model of Youth Football is interesting in that all children continue to play regardless of ability, no elite grouping at younger ages and the best coach's work with the youngest players. This allows them to give every child the opportunity to stay in the sport, play for longer and truly fulfil any potential. There has to be some good in this, for them as a nation with their population to have qualified for the European Championships and World Cup is a remarkable achievement.

Coaches have a key role to play in this as well. Coaches who are obsessed with winning often run sessions with the best players as parents are misled this concept that the best coaches are with the winning teams (we all know that is not the case) and again the coaches have no real view on the long term development of the player. It is all about getting the result at the weekend.

Many parents with limited sporting background will also not know what a good coaching session looks like and nor should they. They are delivered success criteria of 'winning' in many cases as the No. 1 priority. That is what they see on the TV, that is what is celebrated and yet winning is so far down the list of any child's reason for playing the game in the first place.

### **Where do we go from here?**

Parents need to be better equipped with the correct information and not staggering around in the dark clinging on to some of the more popularly held beliefs. Organisations and coaches have got major parts to play in creating a culture that explains different success criteria to them as well as communicating how the long term athletic development model works.

If they can start to do this and change the tone of the sporting experience for the children then perhaps parents will start to make better choices based on scientific fact as opposed to making them based on 'Keeping up with the Joneses'.

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