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# Socialization into Soccer

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## Abstract

Organized sport participation is a popular leisure activity among children and youth around the world. The role of the sports club is to maintain the player's interest in soccer from childhood to adult age but also to produce new players for the adult team. The purpose of this study was to analyze adolescent players' future success as soccer players. In this follow-up study, 28 players from two teams were initially tested at the age of 14–18 years. Background information at adolescent age was collected through questionnaires (success in sport, self-perception, motives and training willingness), skills tests (dribbling and bouncing), and fitness tests (running speed, speed strength, muscular and running endurance). These results are reported in Romar (1990). Twelve years later, 26 players returned a questionnaire about motivation and success in soccer. Based on the playing level attained, players were categorized into three groups. Six players had played in the national league or division one level for at least two years, five players had played at division two or three levels while 15 had played at a lower level. The study showed that the most successful players were more motivated to practice, had tried different sports and lived closer to a soccer field during their adolescence. In addition, the most successful players were also superior in skills tests as adolescents but there were no major differences in fitness levels. The study demonstrated the importance of motivation and skill practice in childhood and adolescence if youths want to become successful as adult players.

## Introduction

Organized sport participation is a popular leisure activity among children and youth around the world. Success in sport appears to be determined by both innate and environmental factors (Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2001). The environment will affect children's access to knowledge, expertise, resources and support. Other factors are more internal and personal. However, early success does not necessarily indicate success later in life (Carlson, 1991).

One theoretical perspective states that sport involvement is a result of social learning where personal attributes interact with significant others within a social situation (Carlson, 1991). Bloom's (1985) work on talented youth and Côté's (1999) and Côté's, Baker's & Abernethy's (2003) subsequent model of talent development in sport underline the central role parents play in the development of talent and expertise.

Parents invest emotional support, time and money to help their children. Parental involvement is described on a continuum from under-involvement through moderate to over-involvement. Parents of successful children showed how to improve, pushed them to train harder and put a certain amount of pressure on them, all this integrated with praise for trying hard, listening to the children's problem, empathy and understanding (Wuerth,

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Lee & Alfermann, 2004). Parental support and encouragement are associated with children's initial enrolment and continuation in sport (Anderson, Funk, Elliot & Hull Smith, 2003). Parental involvement changes as the child grows older and skill levels increase.

The coach is seen as another important socialization agent while coaches have a central role in defining which techniques and strategies children should practice (Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2001). Both practice structure and sport-specific knowledge of coaches are relevant to the development of exceptional performance (Baker, Horton, Robertson-Wilson & Wall, 2003).

The processes of talent detection and development are critical in all sports (Falk, Liodr, Lander & Lang, 2004). There is a clear disagreement among experts on what talent is and which factors can be used in the process of identifying talent (Abbott & Collins, 2004; Williams & Reilly, 2000). There are noticeable individual differences in anthropometric and physiological characteristics among top players and no single method provides a representative assessment of player's capabilities (Reilly, Bangsbo & Franks, 2000). Cross-sectional research on adults cannot be used in talent detection with adolescents because there is a difference between the early qualities required for athletes and the characteristics of champions (Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2001). On the other hand, can psychological variables measured during adolescence predict outstanding performance in adulthood (Morris, 2000)?

However, some researchers (Reilly, Williams, Nevill & Franks, 2000) stated that a test battery may be useful when selecting young players into specialized development programs. Also, Unierzyski (2003) found, in a longitudinal study, that achievement motivation can be used as a variable to identify young tennis players with serious aspirations to play at high level. Players who 6 to 10 years later reached international level in tennis showed a significantly higher level of achievement motivation than players who never reached international level. In addition, Nieuwenhuis, Spamer and Van Rossum, (2002) were able to identify several variables in order to distinguish successful from less successful players in field hockey and pointed out the relevance of considering information from diverse domains; the physical-motor, the kinanthropometric, the psychological and the game-specific motor skills. However, player selection in rugby was based on body mass, playing experience and skill, not on physiological capacities (Gabbett, 2002).

Research on skill development clearly supports the relationship between practice and skill learning. Differences between non-experts and experts on both quantity and quality of training are clearly identified in sport and other domains (Baker, Horton, Robertson-Wilson & Wall, 2003). This is supported by the theory of deliberate practice in describing a close relationship between achievement level and cumulated hours of deliberate practice (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Roemer, 1993). Deliberate practice is not intrinsically motivating, requires effort and attention, and does not lead to immediate social and financial rewards.

Nevertheless, enjoyment is a requirement for participation in sport (Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2001) and the number one reason for withdrawal from sport (Butcher, Lindner, & John, 2002). The loop in the introduction is now closed and I refer back to the parents because research has found that when parental pressure increased, children's reported enjoyment decreased (Anderson, Funk, Elliot & Hull Smith, 2003). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to analyze adolescent players' future success as soccer players.

## Methods

In this follow-up study, 28 players from two teams (W-88 and B-jun) were initially tested at the age of 14–18 years. Background information at adolescent age was collected through questionnaires (success in sport, self-perception, motives and training willingness), skills tests (dribbling and bouncing), and fitness tests (running speed, speed strength, muscular and running endurance). These tests and results are reported in Romar (1990). Twelve years later, 26 players returned a questionnaire about success in soccer, motivation, parent engagement, sport participation, and self and coach evaluation. Based on the playing level attained, players were categorized into three groups. Group A consisted of six players (W-88 = 2, B-jun = 4) and they had played in the national league or division one level for at least two years. Group B's five players (W-88 = 4, B-jun = 1) had played at division two or three levels. Group C consisted of 15 players (W-88 = 9, B-jun = 6) and they had played at a lower level.

## Results

Parent support was important for all players with no differences between players from different groups (see Figure 1). Most of the players felt that parent support was helpful and was seen when the parents drove the child to practice and games, used their own time to support children's sport and provided economical support. The parents showed no pressure for success in soccer, but all players perceived that the parents expected them to do well in school.

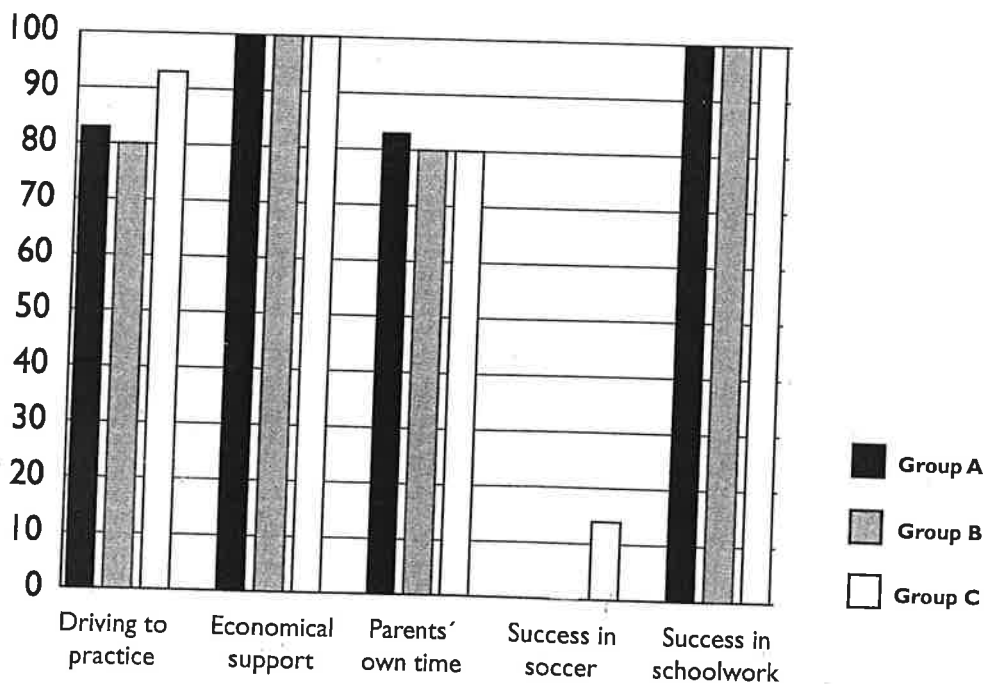


Figure 1. Players who agreed or strongly agreed about parent support or pressure for success.

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Table 1. Me

### Fitness Dimension B-jun

Running speed

Speed strength

Endurance

### W-88

Running speed

Speed strength

Endurance

Soccer skill, 1  
players (group

Almost all friends of the players were involved and interested in soccer. One player from group A said: "It was fun. All my friends played soccer so the common view was that it's fun to play" and one player from group B said: "All my friends played soccer. It was natural that you played". Also, a player from group C said: "Many of my friends played in the same team and the rest of them came often to watch my games".

The players were asked to describe in an open ended question their most important coach. All players described their coach as knowledgeable, motivating, humane, goal oriented, demanding and disciplinary. Players from group A focused less on knowledgeable and goal orientation and more on the coach being humane and motivating. This was described with "he cares" and "he was skilled in motivating the players"

Five out of six group A players lived less than 500 meters from the nearest soccer field at an age of 11-17 years. No player from group B and three players from group C also lived less than 500 meters from the nearest soccer field. Three group B players and seven group C players lived more than one km from the nearest soccer field.

For the younger team (B-juniors), group A was superior to the less successful players in all fitness tests (see Table 1). These players from group A were also taller (A = 179 cm, B = 170 cm, C = 170 cm) which could be a sign of early maturation. For the older team (Wasa-88), players from group A did not show an outstanding performance in fitness tests.

Table 1. Mean results for fitness dimensions of B-juniors and W-88.

Fitness Dimension	Test	Group A	Group B	Group C	Average
<b>B-jun</b>					
Running speed	10 m (s)	2,82	3,04	2,97	2,92
	20 m (s)	2,50	2,89	2,74	2,66
	5*7 m (s)	10,09	10,63	10,54	10,37
Speed strength	Vertical jump(cm)	34,3	24,2	29,2	30,7
	5-jumps (m)	12,39	10,70	10,70	11,38
Endurance	Muscular (s)	77,8	83,0	82,4	80,6
	1,4 km (s)	287	298	294	291
<b>W-88</b>					
Running speed	10 m (s)	2,84	2,69	2,79	2,77
	20 m (s)	2,35	2,32	2,43	2,39
	5*7 m (s)	9,66	9,39	9,64	9,58
Speed strength	Vertical jump(cm)	35,6	40,7	36,7	37,6
	5-jumps (m)	11,90	12,38	12,19	12,19
Endurance	Muscular (s)	80,0	78,3	78,1	78,4
	1,4 km (s)	273	288	300	288

Soccer skill, measure by a dribbling and a bouncing test, was a variable where successful players (group A) were more skilful already in adolescence (see Table 2).

Table 2. Mean results for soccer skill

Soccer Skill	Group A	Group B	Group C	Average
<b>W-88</b>				
Dribbling (s)	24,4	25,5	28,4	27,3
Bouncing (s)	16,7	22,6	32,0	28,1
<b>B-jun</b>				
Dribbling (s)	25,3		26,9	26,3
Bouncing (s)	14,2		29,0	23,1

Players from group A showed higher self-estimated training willingness and particularly higher actual training willingness measured in January and May (see Figure 2). In addition, five out of six group A players had participated in three or more different sports during their adolescence compared to two out of five players in group B. Similarly, seven out of fifteen group C players had participated in three or more different sports.

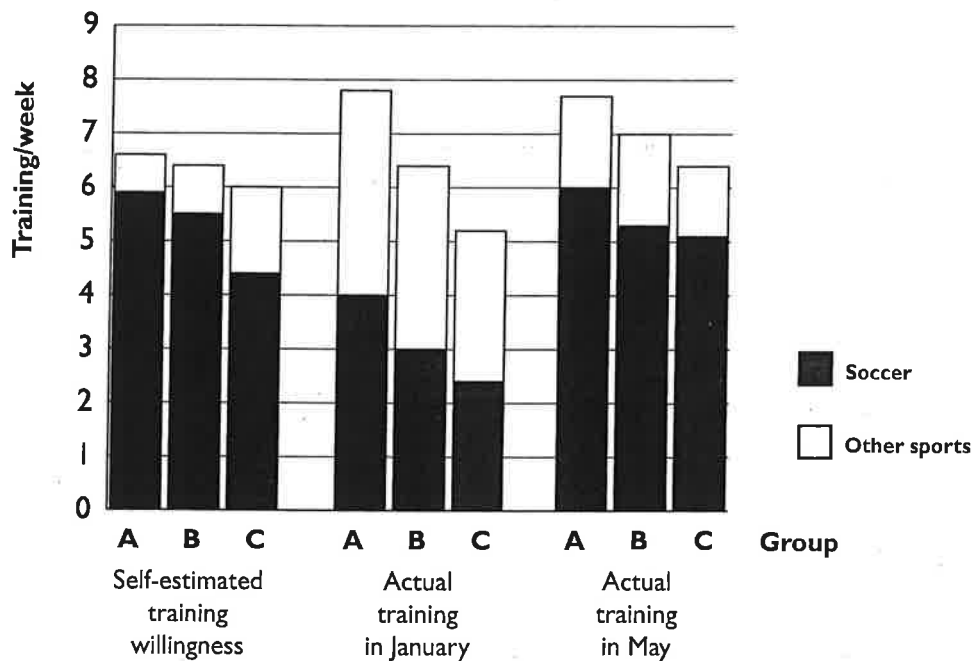


Figure 2. Training willingness per week

The players were asked to describe why they played soccer when they were younger. Enjoyment and self interest were popular motives for all players and particularly for players from group A (see Table 3). The less successful players (group B and C) focused more on the motives that their friends played and to become a better player.

Table 3. The pi

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Fitness
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Table 4. Self e

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Table 3. The players' motive to play soccer when they were young

	Group A	Group B	Group C	Total
It is fun	6	3	10	19
Own interest	4	2	4	10
My friends play	1	2	7	10
A better player	1	3	4	8
Fitness	0	0	2	2
Earn money	0	0	1	1
Good facilities	0	0	1	1
My parents wanted	0	0	1	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>30</b>	

The players were asked to describe, in an open-ended question, characteristics that helped them improve as soccer players. Table 4 shows that goal orientation was perceived as an important characteristic for all players in their development and was described with "obstinacy" and "good attitude". The more successful players did not emphasize fitness, rather tactical and technical skill and own interest.

Table 4. Self evaluation of characteristics that helped the players improve

	Group A	Group B	Group C	Total
Goal oriented	5	4	8	17
Fitness	1	2	9	12
Tactical skill	5	2	1	8
Interest	4	0	2	6
Technical skill	3	2	0	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>20</b>	

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to analyze adolescent players' future success as soccer players. First of all, it needs to be pointed out, that at the start of this study the soccer players were already in their adolescence. Soccer was their life because they still played, while the largest drop out had occurred before this age. So we are not talking about children put into soccer practice once a week by their parents, the soccer players in this study were highly motivated young players.

The social environment provided a solid base for future participation and success. All players indicated that parental support was important and that the parents did not put pressure on the players to succeed in soccer. This is in line with previous research that parental support and pressure are variables central to understanding children's sport involvement (Blom, 1985; Carlson, 1991; Coté et al., 2003). In addition, all players pointed out the importance of having friends that were also interested in or played soccer themselves.

The place where children grow up is also important in providing easy access to practice. In this study, the most successful players lived, as children, close to a soccer field. In addition, the soccer skills of the most successful players were on a higher level, which could support the relationship between practice and skill learning (Baker, et al., 2003). Deliberate practice (Ericsson, et al., 1993), or perhaps here fun practice, is important for skill learning because the successful players were motivated to practice.

Enjoyment is a requirement for sport participation (Butcher, Lindner, & John, 2002; Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2001). These players enjoyed soccer and were not only motivated to practice soccer but they also participated in several sports that gave them a chance to develop many different motor skills. The successful players were also aware of the importance of the sport specific skill which could be seen in their thoughts about the importance of a tactical understanding.

Although Reilly, Williams, Nevill and Franks (2000) indicated that a test battery may be useful when selecting young players for specialized development programs, this study showed that there was no clear advantage in being physically fit as a whole group. However, looking at the younger team (B-jun), there is probably no disadvantage in being in good shape.

## Conclusions

Adding this all together, the study demonstrated the importance of motivation and skill practice in childhood and adolescence if youth want to become successful as adult players. In addition, the social environment (parents, coach and friends) plays a central role in the development of expertise.

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