

# Early specialisation in sports poses risk of burnout among young athletes

Young talent are burning brightly, but then burning out. It's time to look at pressures from society, parents and schools.

## Kenneth Goh

As a young swimmer, "Jack" showed great promise. At just 12 years old, he was the top-ranked swimmer in multiple events in his age group. Many believed he could be the next Joseph Schooling. However, at 14, after years of intensive training and competition, he experienced burnout and retired from competitive swimming.

Jack's experience of burnout is not unique. I know this from my experience as a former competitive swimmer representing Singapore for more than two decades, and from hearing similar cases from coaches at Singapore Aquatics, where I serve as secretary-general. This observation is consistent with several scientific studies that suggest specialising too early in most sports increases the risk of burnout.

The development of high-performance athletes shares similarities with developing entrepreneurial talent - an area of my research and teaching. Both domains are highly selective in achieving success. For example, in the United States, only 2.8 per cent of high school athletes go on to compete at the top-tier collegiate level, according to a report by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) in 2020. In popular sports such as men's basketball, only 0.28 per cent of NCAA athletes become professional. Compare this with the start-up world, where a 2015 study found that just 0.3 per cent of venture-backed start-ups globally were valued at over US\$1 billion (S\$1.35 billion).

Countries with small populations, like Singapore, cannot improve their chances of winning in a highly selective game by simply increasing the talent pool size - we have to improve the odds by reducing the attrition rate among those already part of the talent pool.

The issue of early burnout is thus not just a concern for aquatic sports, but has broader implications on talent development. Importantly, it could also point to a trend of deteriorating mental wellness among young people.

How can we reduce attrition through burnout? Experts point to early specialisation as a key factor in burnout, and we need to identify the causes and how to address them within our system.

### PRESSURE FROM PARENTS, SOCIETY'S EXPECTATIONS

Parental and societal attitudes that create the pressure for early specialisation have been found to be associated with physical and psychological burnout. Unfortunately, such pressure is often justified by citing examples such as golfing legend Tiger Woods or tennis sensation Serena Williams, where early specialisation supposedly contributed to their becoming world-class athletes. But predicting potential in young people is difficult.

A 2021 study by a team of sports scientists and psychologists from Germany and the US reviewed more than 51 international study reports involving 6,096 athletes, including 772 world performers. The study found that while early specialisation predicted junior performance, it did not predict the performance of senior world-class athletes.

Senior world-class athletes reached performance milestones later and accumulated less practice in their main sport and more practice in multiple sports. For example, Singapore's 2016 Olympic swimming champion Joseph Schooling is also a skilled golfer, having started playing the sport at a young age. Similarly, Olympic hopeful Letitia Sim began her athletic journey with gymnastics and golf before transitioning to competitive swimming to join her younger



Nick Mahabir, who turns 19 this year, was recently the top-seeded swimmer in his events at the World Junior Swimming Championships. He started out playing water polo in the US, and his talent in breaststroke became evident only when he was 15. ST PHOTO: LIM YAOHUI



The career of track and field athlete Shanti Pereira holds valuable lessons. Despite facing setbacks, the sprint queen did not give up and emerged stronger, eventually winning the gold medal in the women's 200m event at the Asian Games in 2023. ST PHOTO: CHONG JUN LIANG



A basketball game between Dunman Secondary School (in white) and Geylang Methodist School (Secondary) in March 2022. Instead of trying to identify talent early, young athletes should be given opportunities to participate in various sports for as long as possible, so late bloomers can be nurtured to their full potential, says the writer. ST FILE PHOTO

sister, Levenia (another aspiring Olympian).

Besides the risks to young athletes' physical and mental well-being, early specialisation also shrinks the talent pool by sidelining those who might be late bloomers and require more time to realise their potential.

Nick Mahabir, who turns 19 this year, is one of Singapore's top breaststrokers and was recently the top-seeded swimmer in his events at the World Junior Swimming Championships. He started out playing water polo in the US, and his talent for breaststroke became evident there only when he was 15. Similarly, Asian and Commonwealth Games medallist Teong Tzen Wei debuted on the international stage only when he was 20.

Instead of trying to identify talent early, young athletes should be given opportunities to participate in various sports for as long as possible, so late bloomers can be nurtured to their full potential.

### DIRECT SCHOOL ADMISSION - TIME FOR A RECALIBRATION?

From speaking to local parents and coaches, one commonly cited factor for the persistence of early specialisation is that excelling in a sport offers a pathway for a

child to enter a preferred secondary school through Direct School Admission (DSA).

The DSA was introduced in 2004 to expand the definition of talent and merit beyond academics. While the scheme has undergone several modifications to uphold its original objectives, it may have unintentionally led to early specialisation in sports. Though the scheme has helped increase participation in youth sports, many coaches feel compelled to prioritise short-term

**Many coaches have noted that students who specialise early in a sport to gain direct admission to their preferred school tend to lose interest after crossing major academic milestones, because sports is viewed as a means to an end. To keep young athletes motivated, we should encourage them to participate in sports as an end in itself - because they enjoy it.**

DSA requirements over long-term developmental milestones.

In swimming, for instance, a swimmer's ranking in the sprint events at the National School Games (NSG) is often used as a criterion for the DSA. As a result, some coaches have told me that they feel pressured by parents to train their swimmers to perform well in these shorter events at the expense of other important aspects like technique, aerobic fitness and pacing.

To steer parents and coaches in a direction that will help build a stronger talent pipeline in the long run, one solution could be for schools to tweak the DSA selection criteria to better align them with long-term, high-performance outcomes, in addition to the athlete's performance at the NSG or the school's selection trials. Experts from the National Youth Sports Institute or national sports associations could work with schools to advise on the selection criteria.

### VALUE SPORTS AS AN END IN ITSELF

Many coaches have noted that students who specialise early in a sport to gain direct admission to their preferred school tend to lose interest after crossing major academic milestones, because

sports is viewed as a means to an end.

To keep young athletes motivated, we should encourage them to participate in sports as an end in itself - because they enjoy it. For example, Spain is one of the top water polo nations in the world, and its HaBaWaBa developmental programme for children under 12 is centred on fostering socialisation, having fun and promoting values such as inclusion and respect.

Schools are also moving in this direction, with most primary schools allowing pupils to join a co-curricular activity (CCA) of their choice. Parents should follow suit by letting children participate in a variety of activities they enjoy in order to promote their holistic development, rather than cramming in every hour they can on academic tuition.

### SHIFTING SOCIETAL MINDSETS

While I have focused on talent attrition within aquatic sports in Singapore, the issue of early specialisation reflects broader societal mindsets that are detrimental to talent development.

For example, it reveals our fixation on short-term outcomes at an early age, such as getting into the "best" schools at the expense of longer-term outcomes. Is this necessary? I do not think so, especially if it comes at the expense of one's physical and mental well-being. As an educator who has taught in universities overseas and in Singapore, I have met many talented young adults who come from diverse academic backgrounds. Traits such as character, work ethic and curiosity make them stand out more so than the schools that they went to.

Talent development in sports is just one area where these trends are observed. Similar patterns exist in other domains such as academic tutoring, pressure to join CCAs that can give a child the best opportunity to stand out, and so on. Indeed, reducing pressures towards early specialisation involves a fundamental shift in societal mindsets and educational priorities.

The Ministry of Education has taken several bold steps to reduce the pressure for early specialisation and provide more opportunities for athletes to participate. Programmes like the Junior Sports Academy offer exposure to multiple sports, with over 1,600 students able to play four different sports in a two-year period. Most primary schools have eliminated selection trials for their CCAs, and this allows students to pursue their interests regardless of their performance. Recent changes to the 2024 NSG format doubling the guaranteed number of games for many sports also allow late bloomers to showcase their talents.

As well, parents and other stakeholders in talent development play a crucial role in reducing pressures towards early specialisation. It is important for us to adopt a long-term and holistic view towards development. The career of track and field athlete Shanti Pereira holds valuable lessons. Despite facing setbacks, the sprint queen did not give up and emerged stronger, eventually winning an Asian Games gold medal. Developmental trajectories are never linear and can be bumpy, so we should not focus too much on optimising every short-term milestone. Instead, we should keep sight of the big picture.

Societal mindsets need to shift towards longer-term and more holistic development to reduce talent attrition caused by burnout. By doing so, we can establish a system that supports Singaporean athletes in reaching the world stage and solidifies Singapore's reputation as a centre for developing world-class talent across various domains.

Professor Kenneth Goh is an associate professor of strategy and entrepreneurship (education) at the Lee Kong Chian School of Business, Singapore Management University. He is also secretary-general of Singapore Aquatics and a parent of three children.