

“Early Positive Experiences: What is Age-Appropriate?”

Roundtable Summary

By Tom Farrey, director of the Sports & Society Program

More than a century ago, adults began to organize the sport and play activities of American children as a means of nation-building and human development. Leaders such as physical education pioneer and medical doctor Luther Gulick Jr. conceptualized the framework under which children would engage in these activities, and how they would be delivered, later memorialized in books he authored such as “A Philosophy of Play.” On Sept. 4, 2013, the Aspen Institute’s Sports & Society Program convened more than 25 national leaders from the realms of sport, medicine, health, education and beyond to engage in a similar thought exercise, with an eye toward meeting the needs of today’s children – all of them.

Hosted at the U.S. Open in New York City, the roundtable considered the prospects of anchoring the disjointed U.S. sports system in the principles of age-/developmentally appropriate play. The event was the first of four scheduled meetings through March 2014 specifically focused on how to grow the quality and quantity of youth coaches, given the critical role they play in delivering early positive experiences to children between the ages of 6 and 14 and helping kids create lifelong patterns of health and fitness.

OUTCOMES

- Agreement on the core experience that all kids (recreational *and* elite) should have
- Momentum for the American Development Model as a model to be embraced across sport silos
- Alignment on the role that physical literacy plays in activating that model
- Support for the U.S. Olympic Committee in taking the lead in promoting that model

TOPLINE FINDINGS AND SELECT OBSERVATIONS

Participants expressed strong support for a philosophy of age-appropriate play: In the post-event survey, roundtable attendees were asked “On a scale of 1 to 5, how important is age-appropriate play in the delivery of early positive experiences in sports?” Checking the “five” box were 94 percent of respondents; the only respondent who did not check “five” checked “four.” Comments at the roundtable, some of which are highlighted below, reflected that sentiment.

Dan Gould, director of the Institute for the Study of Youth Sports at Michigan State, told the attendees, “Kids develop cognitively and socially at different rates. It’s hard for younger kids to understand where 10 teammates are if you can’t even understand where three are in terms of who to pass to on a soccer

field. We tell them to go to space (but they sometimes can't do it cognitively). I think we need to do more to better understand them as we go forward."

Tim Flannery, director of education at the National Federation of State High School Associations, said, "We as a federation are trying to educate our coaches and administrators about this because back in the day when I played, all of my coaches understood age-appropriateness. That's what they learned as phys ed trained instructors. That's long gone. That does not exist anymore." Today, youth sport is dominated by volunteer coaches, most of them untrained in key competencies in working with children.

The room for improvement is vast: Asked how well the above principles are adhered to in youth sports, survey respondents offered an average of 2.19 on a scale of one to five. Roundtable members cited many examples, from body-checking in hockey for 8-year-olds, to 9-year-olds chasing tennis rankings, to football coaches promoting head-first drills among middle schoolers. Often, said Sharon Roerty, senior program officer with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and a former youth soccer coach, "It's a lack of awareness and an informed intentional approach to (these) principles. Building awareness, consensus and informed alternatives that eventually become the norm will be the key (to progress)."

Kurt Kamperman, USTA CEO of Community Tennis, expressed the belief that parents are ready for better alternatives. "It's so great to have other NGBs here that want to do the right thing because this is our R&D department at work here: Ripoff and Duplicate," he said. "We've got a lot of people doing some great stuff that we plan to duplicate and borrow ideas from. We can all use a gang-tackle approach. The professionalization in youth sports is a runaway train and it's going to take all of us to slow that train down. Parents know this – they know when the alarm clock's going off at 4:30 and they're taking their 12-year-old to the rink, to the courts, or to the pool. They get it. They just need some help. We all need to band together, people like me who had an elite swimmer daughter with that 4:30 practice in the morning; she went to school every day through middle school and high school with wet hair, smelling like chlorine. We need a little help as parents. And I think working together we can give that (to them)."

Structural barriers to progress include early-forming elite teams: Travel and elite-leaning club teams now form as early as second grade, driven by the chase for college scholarships and preferential admission for athletes. Until the incentive system changes, the culture and decision-making process of parents may not. Kirk Anderson, director of coaching education at the U.S. Tennis Association, said, "Even if parents and coaches know and understand age-appropriate principles for children, I think they would be reluctant to accept them because they would fear the child would fall behind the kid in a more structured program that focuses on training, competition and deliberate practice." Brian Hainline, NCAA chief medical officer, lamented the "societal misinformation" that parents and coaches have about the pathway of most elite athletes, such as the notion the "10,000 hours rule" that has promoted the belief that high doses of focused sport training at the pre-teen ages is necessary for eventual success.

USA Hockey's American Development Model (ADM) is seen as a promising solution: Ken Martel, one of the visionaries behind ADM, expanded upon a brief presentation by a colleague at the spring Aspen launch summit for Project Play and described the fundamentals of ADM. The model is built upon the foundation of "Long Term Athlete Development" with its defined stages for age-appropriate play, and

provides a roadmap for coaches in understanding how to progressively build quality players who enjoy the game. He also spoke to the value of changing the structure – not just the culture – of a sport. For his national governing body, that meant shrinking the size of the ice area on which the grade-schoolers play, as well as banning body checking and eliminating national championships at the Pee Wee level.

“By putting the right game structure in place, the coaches are incentivized to do the right thing in practice,” Martel said. “We eliminated 12-and-under nationals because it’s ridiculous, and it has far-reaching implications on how teams are formed at the local level. (Know that) whatever you set up as your structure, people are going to work really, really hard in the field to be successful at it. So, by eliminating 12-and-under nationals, we’re de-incentivizing coaches and associations to run around and put together super teams of kids ages 9 and 10 because they feel they need to get ready to play at 12-and-under nationals in two years.” Roundtable participants spoke well of ADM in post-event feedback.

Age-appropriate play can be a tool to reduce costs, promote access: Martel said that he had recently come across Designed to Move, with its seven “design filters” for programs looking to engage kids in activities. He said he believed USA Hockey’s model for the most the part satisfied each of those filters, and that he would direct his staff to bear them in mind as they looked to improve ADM. One key filter is “Universal Access,” a challenge for a sport that can cost families \$2,000 a year or more with ice time. But he said ADM can help control costs, certainly at the lowest levels where cross-ice play is encouraged.

“At the eight and under level, we’ll put 50 kids on the rink,” Martel said. “So now, all of a sudden, that shared cost, due to resource utilization, goes way down. And the kids still get everything that they need out of (the activity, regardless of skill level). When I explain it to people, I use a swimming analogy and say, ‘If Michael Phelps has his lane to train in, it doesn’t matter if the kid over here has got his water wings on. It’s okay.’ You can put lots of kids of different abilities out there, and it just reduces the cost.”

Creating ADM plans will be more difficult for smaller NGBs: For USA Hockey, one of the keys to driving policy adoption in the grassroots has been the hiring of regional managers who work with community clubs to facilitate change. “Boots on the ground,” Martel said. “But your leadership also has to be on board. You have to understand what the risk tolerance is of not just your (organization), but the true risk tolerance of your leadership and the people that are at the grassroots level.” USA Hockey receives a multi-million annual grant from the National Hockey League to support its initiatives, including ADM.

Peter Davis, former USOC director of coaching, noted that few NGBs have such resources. “Is this type of concept or system transferrable to other sports? I keep thinking of the practical reality and the challenges of NGBs. The term ‘governing’ is a relative term within all the sports. I mean, it’d be nice to be US Soccer and the USTA and USA Swimming and, and US Ski and Snowboard Association, but the majority of our NGBs here are barely managing to survive financially, with little staff and resources. To come in and tell them to, or not tell them, but suggest or promote, that they should redesign their coaching education component, redesign their rules, restructure their competition structure, manage this, and quality control this from top to bottom, I mean, a lot of the organizations ... just can’t do it.”

In Canada, each national governing body was given \$75,000 by Sport Canada, the sports ministry of the federal government, to develop an LTAD plan. In the U.S., there is no equivalent body – no department

of sports -- just an unfunded mandate from Congress to the USOC since 1978 to coordinate amateur sport activity. "There's this misconception that the USOC can fund it all, and it's a misconception that sports can just turn the switch and do this," Davis said. "They can't. There has to be some support and help and structure and resources provided so they can even think about doing it."

Sport sampling should trump early sport specialization: Michael Sagas, chair of the University of Florida department of sport management, related findings from a literature search that his group, the Sport Policy and Research Collaborative, conducted on athletic development and children. He cited a study published this year that examined sport participation patterns across the life span. "The kids that were early specializers, surveyed now as adults, (often) don't play sports anymore," he said. "Kids that played multiple sports as kids are still playing." He said his search found "no drawbacks to early sampling."

Dr. Neeru Jayanthi, an orthopedist at Loyola University, said that early specialization in one sport is one of the strongest predictors of injury. "We followed about 1,200 kids, all young athletes, and ... we found a highly significant risk of injury and also serious overuse injuries that would keep kids out for one to six months based on participation levels, and that was independent and hours (devoted to the sport) per week. So the fact that you specialized, that alone increased (injury) risk. The odds of that happening are anywhere from 70 percent to 93 percent greater" than with child athletes who do not specialize.

Jessica Aney, 15, one of the nation's top young prospects in both tennis and hockey, spoke to the protective benefits of playing multiple sports. "Most of the kids I've competed against have had at least one injury that has lasted a month, and I've never had an injury that's put me out over about two days," she said. "So I think that that playing two sports and strengthening different muscles and some of the same muscles too in both sports really helps prevent injury and keeps you fresh."

Actually, the recipe is sports sampling + life balance: Nathan Plowman, partnerships director for Nike's Access to Sport division, urged caution in communication around the multi-sport message. "I am thinking through the unintended consequences of encouraging parents to encourage their kids to play multiple sports because there's a finite amount of time that kids will have to play sports," he said. "We can say it's 20 percent this (sport), 20 percent this (sport), or whatever the (recommended) ratio is. But I can see that a different reality will happen, which is kids are up in the pool at 4:30 in the morning, they're on the rink by 7, then they have to play soccer in the evening and basketball later on. So we're not replacing specialization with sampling, we're replacing specialization with multiple specialization because that's the only way that parents are going to create elite athletes out of their kids."

Any suggestion that sport sampling is advised must be delivered with guidance on proper dosage and duration, of sports activity in total, consistent with the human needs and limitations of children. One rule of thumb that has been proposed is the number of hours training per week should not exceed the age of the child.

Free play should be built into any development model: Several participants spoke to the need to make sure that any model of age-appropriate play cannot be all about organized play. Coaches should encourage kids to take charge of and create their own games, to promote love of the game and to foster athletic development through the benefits of unstructured play. Kristen Dieffenbach, professor at the

University West Virginia, said, “We should make sure recommendations include deliberate play concepts, that the type of activities that kids are being put in aren’t always adult-structured, adult-driven models. Parent should know that you can take them to the gym, but it might be open gym time. It might be open hours where there’s not an adult saying ‘OK, do this, do this, do this.’ “

Dr. Jayanthi added that in his work he has found that among children whose ratio of organized play to unstructured play exceeds 2:1, “your risk of serious overuse injury was much more likely. Free play itself may be protective of injury.” Andrea Jaeger, formerly tennis pro who was ranked as the world’s No. 2 as a teenager, said she enjoyed lots of casual play as a kid. “The biggest thing that’s happening now in any kind of sport for kids is the fun factor has been left out,” she said. “If you look at a child that’s been injured, oftentimes an injury will manifest from something that is just not enjoyable. It’s no longer fun. Their voice, in a sense, to get out of that sport is a physical ailment, an injury.”

Javier Perez is coach of the U18 U.S. men’s national soccer team under the US Soccer Federation, which now explicitly encourages youth coaches to step back and more loosely organize practices. The angle is promotion of creative play. “Countries like Brazil or Spain, they are so successful in soccer because they still have this street culture where kids go out there with friends. Sometimes when (U.S.) coaches go to South America, they are shocked at the way training is not very well organized. But that’s not the big issue because players are going to be on the street anyway playing, developing their abilities.”

“Fun” must be central – but as defined by kids: Sociologist Jay Coakley said, “The way children define fun is much different than the way adults define fun. We give lip service to this concept (of fun) but we have never really have defined it. Of course we want fun, but what is fun to a 6-year-old? What’s fun to a 10-year-old? What’s fun to a 12-year-old? All of those things differ, and my research shows that children are defining fun in ways that are antithetical to what happens in institutionalized competitive sports. Fun is ... action, personal involvement in the action, controlled uncertainty which is basically a challenge. Kids see it as something they can get immersed in but doesn’t overwhelm them. That, and playing with people who they know, friends. There’s a social component to fun.”

Coakley noted, for instance, that the instinct of many adults coaching baseball is to identify the kid who is mostly likely to pitch a no-hitter. “Well, when I talk to (kids in) baseball, what are the two or three most fun things they say they do? Catch, hit, and run. Yet, what do parents and adults want to do as soon as they take over baseball? Eliminate the need to catch, hits, and run. They eliminate the entire basis for fun, so then you have to have external rewards to keep kids involved: uniforms, hats, trophies. You eliminate the basis for intrinsic motivation. You set up yourself for a dropout, if they don’t burn out first. So, we really have to pay attention to the meaning of fun rather than just using the word fun.”

We also need to redefine the notion of who is an “athlete”: Nike has done a lot of work understanding the psychological orientation of kids to sports, Plowman said. One of the more revealing findings today, he said: “The term ‘athlete’ is a turnoff for most kids. Most kids have decided by the age of 9 whether they’re an athlete or not, and most kids have decided that they’re not an athlete by the age of 9. So any concepts around being an athlete are kind of irrelevant to many kids.”

This is unfortunate, he said, because “if you have a body, you’re an athlete. So one of the things that Nike is doing ... is broadening the definition of sport, and broadening the definition of ‘athletes.’ You might have seen our brand campaign from last year which is about ‘find your greatness,’ that greatness doesn’t exist in one person or one place. Greatness is within all of us. So in that sense we are bringing the power of the brand to bear, to try and broaden that definition of sport and athlete. It’s something of an uphill struggle because I think athleticism and athletes are associated with the very elite.”

The concept of Physical Literacy needs more shaping, development in the U.S.: Colin Hilton, CEO of the Utah Olympic Legacy Foundation and leader of a working group created by Project Play on Physical Literacy, led a session on the topic and proposed a definition. “The one I gravitated to reads like this: Physical literacy is the development and mastering of fundamental movement skills and fundamental sport skills that permit a child to read their environment and make appropriate decisions, allowing them to move confidently and with control in a wide range of physical activity situations,” Hilton said. “It is the foundation of both long-term participation and performance to the best of one’s abilities.”

Roerty warned against using the term Physical Literacy strictly in an athlete development context. It’s not about “getting people ready to be athletes. I think when we talk about ‘financial literacy’ we’re not getting people ready to be investors; we’re getting them to a state where they understand what money is and how it works. To me, literacy is about knowing. It’s establishing a baseline. It’s getting some of the mechanics down about whatever the topic is. It’s a competency. If you use that competency and then to go on to become an athlete, great -- some people will do that. And if you use that competency to be active for the rest of your life, you do that.”

The USOC plays a leading role in driving reforms: Given its Congressional charter and relationships with sport national governing bodies, Coakley said the USOC is a key player in driving policies that can help coaches help children but that leaders there cannot do it alone. “As a sociologist, I see change occurring through major institutional structures, even if it is initiated outside of those structures. In the case of youth sports, these structures include the family, education at all levels, health care through (general practitioners) and public health officials and workers at the local level, government at local and national levels, the media, the economy through corporate sponsors and equipment producers, and as a last resort, the legal system through court cases involving negligence. Our challenge is to find ways into each of these institutional spheres so we reach the people who directly control the lives of children, and the lives of others who control the lives of children.

“If we can provide these people with a clearly defined set of goals related to developing physical literacy in age-appropriate ways, along with easy-to-use assessment and accountability procedures, we can exert influence over youth sports, especially if we can also recommend incentive strategies for taking action. Therefore, we must identify the reputedly credible people who control information flows in each of these spheres and have them present information on physical literacy, assessment, and accountability—and the stakes, positive and negative, associated with taking directed actions.

“The USOC and its federation structure will be a good ‘next place’ to figure out how this might be done.”

The USOC says it accepts the challenge: Chris Snyder, USOC director of coaching, reported on the progress of a task force created at the urging of USOC CEO Scott Blackmun after the Project Play launch summit. Snyder said the task force, which includes officials from several NGBs as well, is in the process of drafting a vision statement for sports based on age and developmentally appropriate play. After Snyder described its essential elements – many of which could be found in the American Development Model -- nearly all participants raised their hand when asked if they support the USOC working model.

“We’re seeing this athlete development concept as one where we can all bond,” Snyder said. “We want to make sure that we have one voice coming out potentially and we don’t have a lot of different models and other crazy things coming up to confuse America. Will other NGBs adopt the development model we come up with? We hope so. We hope they all buy in, but we hope we thought about their vision and engaged them enough that they can have some buy-in to the whole concept before we go out there.

“A consistent message is what parents, athletes and coaches need. If we’re all speaking the same language and saying, ‘Hey look, you need X, Y, and Z to step on the field in order to coach, or you need X, Y, and Z to be able to do the sport at the age of nine the appropriate way’ (then it will be accepted). If it’s coming not just from the Olympic Committee but the high schools federation, the USTA, USA Swimming and AAHPERD (sport educators trade group) – if it’s coming from everybody – then (people will think), gosh darn it, it might just be true!”

He said the USOC is considering allowing the use of the Olympic rings as the equivalent of a Good Housekeeping Seal of approval in coaching materials, to drive credibility and adoption.

Plowman lauded the USOC and NGB task force for its “great work” in responding to the need for a guiding model. As they move forward, he encouraged them to keep in mind the needs of all kids, not just those with potential Olympic talent. “When we talk about fulfilling people’s potential in sport ... we’re developing human potential. We’re not developing athletic potential,” he said.

At the back end of the project, an integrated communications plan is essential: Sue Hunt, chief marketing officer for the USTA, discussed her organization’s hard-fought progress in introducing and creating a growing acceptance of reforms at the 10 and Under level where clubs are now encouraged to create opportunities for children play on smaller-sized courts with balls that are easier to control.

“One of the reasons I think tennis has had some success is we went both ways,” Hunt said. “We went out and we talked to our providers about changing the sport, but we simultaneously went to parents, who went to the providers and made demands. So I love what the USOC is saying and our goal really ... is that when we’re ready, maybe two years from now, that we might partner with the Ad Council and all come together with one unified platform, one website to go to, to give parents the information they need. I think they’re desperate for it. I think there are a hundred different messages out there and parents don’t know what to do. So we have to come together once we have our plan formulated and let parents know (what it is), since they’re involved in it and they’re coaching and they care.”

Project Play is seen as a venue to explore and catalyze change: Martel wrote in his post-event survey, “USA Hockey is committed to follow through on the final recommendations of Project Play.” Each of the

survey respondents said they would like to attend future Project Play events, and 94 percent said they would highlight the initiative and its content to their constituent networks.

NEXT STEPS

- Further define the role of coaching in delivering early positive experiences
- Define the specific domains that all youth coaches need to be trained in
- Conceptualize a simple, affordable, scalable model that can be embraced by all coaches of kids between the ages of 6 and 14

SUPPORTING MATERIALS

Research report on athletic development and children, by Mike Sagas, University of Florida's Sport and Policy Research Collaborative (FINAL): <http://www.aspeninstitute.org/publications/research-brief-what-does-science-say-about-athletic-development-children>

Video of moderated conversation with David Epstein, Sports Illustrated senior writer and author of New York Times best-seller "The Sports Gene"; and Olympic champion swimmer Dara Torres (9/3/13): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NstMEokx2s8>

"The Sports Gene and Why Parents Need to Relax a Little," Huffington Post column by Tom Farrey (9/3/13): http://www.huffingtonpost.com/tom-farrey-/post_5519_b_3860574.html

"Miracle on Ice," ESPN magazine article on the American Development Model, by Tom Farrey (6/26/13): http://espn.go.com/nhl/story/_/id/9418183/usa-hockey-encourages-kids-nhl-dreams-play-other-sports-espn-magazine

Designed to Move: <http://www.designedtomove.org/>

Event agenda, list of participants, other materials can be found on Aspen Institute Project Play microsite: <http://www.aspenprojectplay.org/>

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The Sports & Society Program thanks Nike for its generous support of the coaching roundtable series