

The Making of an Olympian

August 04, 2021

The world's top athletes, including Olympians, rarely start competing at a young age or specialize early in the sport that will make them champions, according to [a provocative new study](#) of the athletic backgrounds of thousands of successful athletes. Instead, the study finds, most world champions sample one sport after another as children and gain mastery in their chosen activities considerably later than other, more focused young athletes whom they eventually go on to defeat.

The study, which involved male and female competitors in a wide range of sports, offers lessons and cautions for parents, coaches and child athletes about how to understand talent, manage expectations, build an athletic career and recalibrate the long-term importance for 7- or 8-year-olds of making — or missing out on — select teams in children's leagues.

If you are a sports parent, though, it is difficult not to believe that athletic success for your children requires early specialization. Most of us are all too familiar with the tropes about tiny sports prodigies and their outsize success, such as Tiger Woods making tee shots at age 2 or Venus and Serena Williams slamming tennis aces while still in elementary school.

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