

# Sport: the benefits of early diversification

Director of Sport, David Faulkner, explores the advantages of sport sampling and provides guidance on the right age to specialise in a specific sport.

Sport specialisation has been a hot topic for debate in sporting circles since London 2012 – but what does it actually mean? It is most often defined as an intense year-round training programme in a single sport, with the exclusion of participation in other sports and activities.

As research on the topic becomes more widely publicised and debated, I am frequently approached by parents for guidance: “What age should my child specialise in one sport?” My response is that it needs to be the pupil’s choice when to specialise, however this has to be an informed decision with support and guidance from coaches and parents.

At Millfield the focus is always on ensuring a positive experience that fosters and maintains a lifelong involvement in physical activity. As general guidance I recommend multi-sport participation until late adolescence / Year 11+ for most sports, as clear evidence informs us that keeping a wider participation across a breadth of sports is beneficial for long-term success and wellbeing.

Early specialisation can lead young people into sports that often are not their own choice, often compelling them to remain in activities that are not motivating, or suitable for their athletic abilities. Evidence also shows that those who specialise younger rarely commit to the sport in the long term.

This is often followed with: “But, will my child fall behind others in a more focused training and competition programme?” Dr. Anders Ericsson’s much publicised 10,000 hour concept of ‘deliberate practice’ actively promotes that the key to success in any field is, to a large extent, a matter of practising a specific task for a total of around 10,000 hours. However, this theory does not take into consideration the physical, emotional and social implications to young people who only play a single sport.

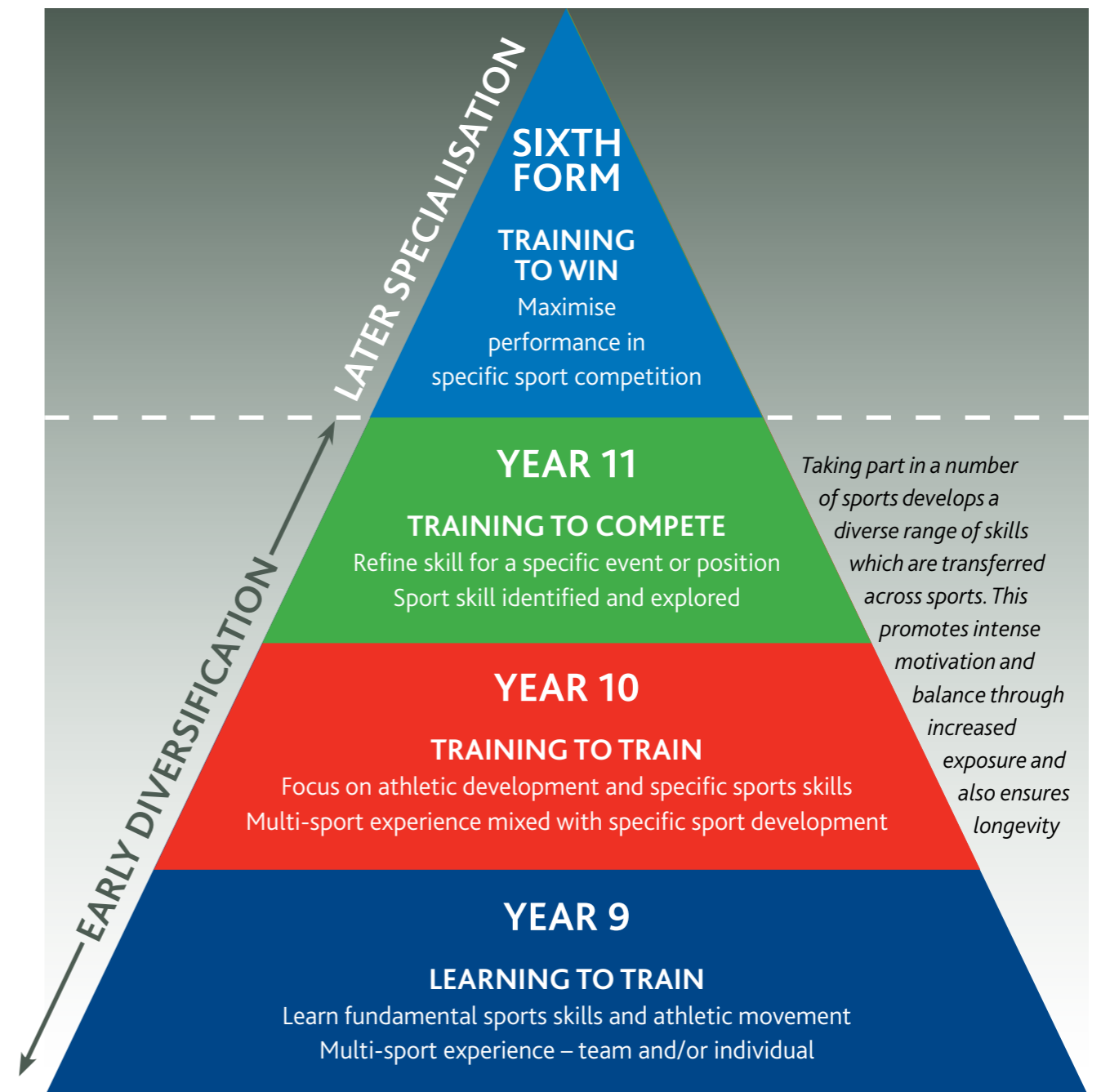
But does the science tell us to wait? A recent consensus statement in the *British Journal of Sports Medicine* on reducing the risk of burnout and injury in youth sport, encourages the diversity of sports training during early to middle adolescence, alongside structured physical training programmes.

Additionally, the National Athletic Trainers’ Association in America highlights the importance of physical conditioning programmes, and delayed sport specialisation, to reduce the risk of paediatric injury. These two papers have directed the framework for athletic development provision for our pupils.

Athletic development at Millfield is underpinned by a process of ingraining, expanding and exploring physical motor abilities. Millfield Sport aims for pupils to develop a large toolbox of movement skills underpinned by the principles of general physical preparation considering the pupils training age and physical development.

These underpinning values enable us to strive to develop physically robust and tolerant young athletes who possess well-skilled default movement strategies that are transferable to any sporting environment.

At Millfield we believe that sport sampling in youth is imperative, and our Year 9 programme is a reflection of this. Our philosophy is clear; for every individual to participate in team and individual sports



to ensure wide physical development, experimentation for the individual and the opportunity to try new things. This also allows for greater social integration. The more sports young people practise, the greater ease they feel when eventually selecting one sport that suits their interests and physical strengths.

There are of course exceptions to this guidance; sports such as swimming and tennis have greater demand on an individual’s time; however the Year 9 programme gives even these pupils the opportunity to participate in a wider games programme.

There are sports which suit later specialisation such as rowing, athletics,

cricket and now, with recent work by the RFU, rugby. Sports organisations are recognising the value of gaining wider skills to improve tactical, technical and physical development and providing the ‘edge’ over competitors.

In summary, young people who experience a fun approach emerge more balanced and well-rounded than those who do not, ultimately increasing their chance of being a high performer in their chosen sport.

As always, good communication and understanding between the young person, parents, houseparent and coaches about goals, expectations and motivations ensures the outcome for a healthy and successful young athlete.

## PUPIL AND PARENT GOALS AT DIFFERENT AGES

### Years 9 to 11

- Pupil: learn how to train and compete
- Parents: let go slowly and surely, and be realistic with the help of a coach

### Sixth Form

- Pupil: compete to win, as all of the skills are now in place
- Parents: keep the home safe as an escape base for the pupil, to support the coach