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The parental dilemma of talented children

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ABSTRACT



A lot of talented children aspire to be professional athletes. They spend many hours each week practicing and competing in the hope of achieving this. To what extent should a parent permit, encourage or even force them to do so? Professional sporting success provides substantial goods and rewards. However, trying to achieve it imposes many costs on children, such as the diminishment of important childhood goods. I argue that these costs outweigh the potential rewards, especially given the improbability of success, and so parents should not try to maximise their children's talents for professional success. I also show that how one weighs up the costs and rewards depends on one's conception of childhood. Finally, I suggest that parents, qua member of society, may have good reason to maximise their child's talent, given the social benefits talent maximisation provides. I conclude by arguing that this does not outweigh parents' duty to provide a good childhood for their children, which talent maximisation undermines.

KEYWORDS Childhood goods; children's well-being; parental duties; sporting success; talent development; the nature of childhood

Introduction: all or nothing

In a recent interview, the Liverpool and England men's footballer, Trent Alexander-Arnold, discussed the demands and sacrifices involved in becoming a professional footballer. He recounted that at the age of twelve he trained every night of the school week and played matches at the weekend. 'Football wasn't a hobby for me from secondary school on ... There was never time to hang out with mates. We were never in a position to have family holidays' (Segalov 2023). To train even more, Trent transferred to a school that supported boys in the Liverpool football academy:

That was my life for four years ... It's all I did. Never once deviating from it. I spent a little bit of time with Mum and my brothers, but nothing of any substance ... I definitely disconnected from my family at that point. I just didn't see them. I was up before anyone to go to school and would get home

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late, totally knackered . . . I never once went to a house party or hung out after school at the shops, or walked home with mates from school. (Segalov 2023)

What Trent describes is common for children who aspire to be elite sports-people. Trent says he has no regrets about his childhood and adolescence, but that is because of the success he has enjoyed. Indeed, the main point of his interview was to highlight the experiences of the many thousands of hopefuls who do *not* become professional footballers. Over 99% of players signed to a football academy will not have a professional footballing career. For many who do sign professional contracts, their career will last only a few years before petering out into semi-professionalism or they may leave the game entirely. A lot of the players who are dropped from academies experience significant mental health and financial issues, both because of the loss of identity that comes with 'failing' as a footballer, and the lack of alternatives open to them (because, typically, they eschew academic endeavours in order to focus on football). A stark example of this is Jeremy Witsen, who took his own life at the age of seventeen after he was released from Manchester City's academy (The Guardian 2020)

In this paper, I analyse the extent to which the parents of talented children ought to try to maximise their child's talent, especially in the hope that the child achieves professional success in an activity they excel in. I argue that there are very good reasons for parents not to do this. However, I show that how strong one thinks these reasons are depends on one's conception of childhood and childhood goods. I also suggest that there is a strong societal interest in children fully realising their talents. This means that parents, *qua* parents, ought not to try to maximise their child's talent, but *qua* a member of society, they have good reason to do so. I conclude that their parent-centred reasons outweigh their society-centred reasons.

Clarifying the dilemma

Some children exhibit the potential to excel in an activity. Even at the age of, say, seven, a child can be significantly better than almost all her peers at playing the piano or tennis or golf. Parents must decide the extent to which they encourage, or even try to force, their children to develop this talent. In this regard, it is important to distinguish nurturing a child's talent to a (reasonably) high level from seeking to *maximise* their talent in order to achieve *professional success*.¹ The latter requires much more extensive commitment and training within a highly-competitive environment. Typically, the child's life will revolve around their chosen activity. Call this 'talent maximisation for professional success' (hereafter TMPS).

There are strong reasons for parents to nurture their child's athletic talents. Sports participation is good for children's physical and mental

well-being (Downward and Rasciute 2011; Merkel 2013; Silva, Monteiro, and Sobreiro 2020). Children often enjoy activities they are good at and thus participation in them can be fun and fulfilling (Dixon 2007). Becoming very good in activities like sport or music can provide further benefits, from being esteemed by peers to being a part of groups or clubs (that, e.g. build social networks and a sense of social belonging) and enhancing one's career prospects (such as when applying to elite universities). There is also a common belief that sport can build positive character traits, such as a hard-work ethic, commitment and perseverance, teamwork and unselfishness.² Finally, Russell has argued that sport can provide children with crucial opportunities for 'self-affirmation', in which 'we learn and affirm who we are' by confronting and extending 'the limits of our being' (Russell 2007, 181).

These reasons can be used to support TMPS. There are also additional reasons to pursue TMPS. Professional athletes can earn vast sums of money. For example, the average male Premier League footballer's salary is around £3 million a year, excluding various sponsorship deals and other sources of income, such as media work. In addition, sports stars enjoy an almost-unrivalled level of fame and admiration. Finally, many people love sport and want to emulate the players they admire. Insofar as we ought to pursue a career that we are passionate about, it is understandable that children and their parents want them to become successful sportspeople.

Do these reasons mean that parents *ought* to allow or even try/force to make their children to engage in TMPS? Dixon has suggested that the parents of very athletically talented children may have a duty 'to encourage participation in competitive sport in order to keep open the possibility that their children will excel' (Dixon 2007, 152). Consequently, 'we might regard parents who fail to encourage their children to make the most of their abundant natural ability as negligent' (Dixon 2007, 152).³ Thus, he seems (to some extent) to endorse efforts to *maximise* talent (if that is how we construe the idea of making the most of one's talent).⁴ His main reason for this is that it offers the chance of self-fulfilment, but he also notes that it provides the option of a professional career. At the same time, he highlights several 'highly questionable' practices connected with talent development, such as parents trying to gain their children a competitive edge by delaying their entry into kindergarten and the trend towards putting children into increasingly competitive leagues at ever-younger ages (Dixon 2007, 153). He also notes the slim chances of professional success and the worry about dedicating one's childhood to a single activity. Dixon is right to sound these warnings, but his account of fulfilling sporting talent is rather too sanguine and does not provide a comprehensive assessment of the costs that it comes with. To see why, we can begin by understanding just how demanding TMPS is.

Maximising talent

In a classic study of the development of talent in young people, Bloom and his colleagues conducted detailed interviews with successful people and their families across a variety of activities, including classical pianists, Olympic swimmers and tennis players (Bloom 1985a). Dan, a concert pianist, began lessons before the age of six and practiced every day, before and after school. The situation was similar for aspiring swimmers (Kalinowski 1985). Around the age of seven, they started competing in competitions. The average swimmer would be practicing for twelve to sixteen hours a week (up to two-and-a-half hours each day, six days a week). Around the age of ten or eleven, this would increase to two hours in the morning and two hours in the afternoon. As one parent said, 'Swimming was our way of life. All of our vacations and extra money went into swimming weekends – that was our recreation – swimming, swimming, swimming' (Kalinowski 1985, 170). Mirroring this, the average age that aspiring tennis players entered competitive competitions was eight-and-a-half. During their early years (ages six to ten), the children played tennis for an average of 16.8 hours per week, with five of the children in the study playing more than twenty-five hours per week (Monsaas 1985).

Bloom et al.'s research was published in 1985. Given the increased allure of many such activities, not least because the financial and social rewards (e.g. fame) are so much greater, it is reasonable to assume that TMPS has become much more competitive and demanding. This has been documented by Farrey, who reveals the commitment to, and demandingness of, TMPS within America and the extreme lengths that many parents go to in order to develop their children's talent in the hope that they will achieve professional success (Farrey 2008). As he writes, 'The race to the bottom of youth sports, where there's no such thing as too young, represents one of the most profound – and unexamined – trends of recent decades' (Farrey 2008, 14).

To give some examples of this, there are world golfing competitions for children under the age of six. A Chinese family spent the summer in the United States, at a cost of \$10,000, so their young son could play the kid-golf circuit. A standard Saturday for a pair of seven-year-old twins living is to play three ice-hockey games and to train for two hours, at four different ice-rinks. Their mother believes that without focused training, they will not have a chance of playing high school sport: 'Let kids be kids? Is that possible anymore?' she wonders (Farrey 2008, 143). Supporting her assertion, the oldest that a member of a prestigious under-12 ice-hockey team started training was seven. Some members started training by the age of two and all but two of them by the age of five (Farrey 2008, 144). In 1995, the average age that boys *began* playing organised sports was eight. Now, eight is the age that many of them begin to compete for national titles (Farrey 2008, 158).

An influential figure that has driven the demandingness of TMPS is Tiger Woods, who was trained by his father, Earl Woods, to be a golfer almost from birth (Earl sat newborn Tiger in a high chair in the garage so Tiger could watch him hit golf balls) (Farrey 2008, 46ff.). At the age of two, Tiger made his famous appearance on *The Mike Douglas Show*, chipping and putting with Bob Hope. His training had already begun at this age and his subsequent childhood was structured entirely around it. Earl Woods wrote a very popular book, *Training a Tiger*, in which he emphasised the importance of extensive practice and dedication to a particular activity from a very early age. Along similar lines, Michelle Wie – once touted to be the female Tiger – started playing golf at the age of four and was the youngest player ever to qualify for the US Amateur Public Links Championship (Farrey 2008, 62). The message was: your child can become a Tiger (or tigress), if they only practice long enough and hard enough, from a young enough age.⁵

Consequently, youth sports in countries like the United States and United Kingdom are characterised by an increase in, and intensification of, early age specialisation (Malina 2010; Popkin, Bayomy, and Ahmad 2019). This commitment increases as they get older, so TMPS becomes *more* demanding as the child ages. Thus, I think it is reasonable to conclude that, for the average child engaging in TMPS, their lives – from early childhood through adolescence – are almost entirely dedicated to this, both in terms of the number of hours spent on the activity and the fact that their life is structured around it, to the exclusion of almost all else. Of course, the carrot is that one could be the next Roger Federer or Serena Williams, enjoying huge wealth and fame playing the sport you love. Is striving to achieve this worth it and is allowing/encouraging one's child to do so justified?

The costs of TMPS

The first substantial cost of TMPS is the diminishment/loss of some important childhood goods. By 'childhood goods' I mean those goods that (a) make a significant, direct contribution to a good childhood; and/or (b) have a developmental value for children *qua* prospective adults (Gheaus 2014, 36). Goods that make childhood good *qua* childhood can be called 'intrinsic childhood goods', whilst childhood goods that contribute to adulthood goods can be called 'instrumental childhood goods'. Both are important. How important they are will depend on one's view of childhood and its relationship with adulthood. I discuss this later in the paper. For now, it is worth emphasising that childhood is not simply preparation for adulthood. The child is not just an 'adult in development'; childhood is an important stage of one's life, independent of its relationship with adulthood. We must be concerned with the quality of the child's life, regardless of how well this prepares it for adulthood (although, of course, the latter matters too).

Let us consider some important childhood goods, especially those that contribute to the intrinsic value of childhood. Whilst there is no consensus on a definitive list, the following items have been suggested to belong on it:

- Unstructured, imaginative play (Brennan 2014, 42)
- A lack of significant responsibility (Matthews and Mullin 2023).
- Considerable free time (Matthews and Mullin 2023).
- Play and carefreeness (Ferracioli 2020)
- Relationships with other children and with adults (Brennan 2014, 42)

Clearly, TMPS erodes all of these, often quite substantially. Many child athletes have very little free time. To exaggerate slightly, but only slightly, when not studying, eating or sleeping, they are engaging in their chosen activity. In addition, they exist in a very competitive environment. From an early age, they must be better than their peers. Children can start training with professional football clubs from the age of five and can enrol in football academies from the age of eight. If a child does not do this at these ages, then their chances of success are already hindered substantially. To be part of an academy is to be in a high-pressure environment where, increasingly, success matters above all else. Winning or losing takes on great significance; the stakes are high and the child may feel a heavy burden of responsibility to succeed. As Alexander-Armstrong observed, football very quickly stopped being a *hobby* for him. Coakley summarises this by stating that the ‘fun’ of youth sports is ‘now defined in terms of becoming a better athlete, becoming more competitive, and being promoted into more highly skilled training and competition categories’ (Coakley 2008, 128–29).

This is well documented by Bloom et al.’s study. As one of the researchers wrote, ‘Prior to joining an AUU team our swimmers say they swam for fun; after joining the team they were swimmers first and foremost. Gradually schoolwork, leisure and (non-swimming) friends receded into the background’ (Kalinowski 1985, 155). Similarly, Monsaas records that one of two main qualities noted by the tennis players about themselves was the fact that they were ‘extremely competitive. Winning was all important to them. Almost all the tennis players we talked to reported that they would work hard and practice long hours because they hated to lose’ (Monsaas 1985, 239).⁶ All of this is detrimental to enjoying (unstructured) play, carefreeness and a lacking of significant responsibility.⁷ It is also detrimental to children enjoying positive friendships, both because of lack of time they can spend playing with friends (outside of their sport) and the pressure to view sporting peers as rivals.

TMPS can also damage the parent-child relationship, another key childhood good, owing to the problematic ways that parents become involved in their child’s athletic development (Coakley 2008, 132–33; Cumming and

Ewing 2002; LeBolt 2015; Witt and Dangi 2018). Parents often try to develop the child's talent themselves, with many trying to take on a significant coaching role. Extreme, well-known examples of this issue include Tanya Harding, an American figure skater, and Jelena Dokic, an Australian tennis player. Dokic wrote a best-selling book documenting the years of psychological and physical abuse her father subjected to her to, very often following a bad training session or match, which helped shine a spotlight on a pervasive problem in tennis and beyond (Dokic 2018). Of course, many children not engaged in TMPS are abused by their parents and so it may not have been the *cause* of the abuse that the likes of Dokic experienced (in other words, her father may have been abusive even if she had not been trying to become a professional tennis player). However, it may well amplify it, provide regular provocation for it and serve to justify it.

On a less extreme level, and much more commonplace, children whose parents push them towards TMPS may feel less unconditional love (they may think they must avoid disappointing their parents and that they must succeed to earn their parents approval), less able to relate to their parents *qua* parents (rather than as coaches) and less able to share things with them openly (e.g. not letting them know that their ankle is sore). The role of a coach is very different to that of a parent thus blurring the lines between them might well be challenging for both child and parent. Furthermore, children will necessarily miss out on bonding activities with their parents. If a child is training every evening and weekend, then they are not going on daytrips with their parents or otherwise spending quality time with them. The time they do spend together will be focused on their attempt to achieve success in their chosen activity (Farrey 2008).

In addition to the loss of these childhood goods, there is the negative impact of being unsuccessful. Investing so much in an activity, sacrificing so much in doing so, and defining oneself in terms of it, is likely take a heavy toll on the child if they then fail to transition to a professional career. I cannot find long-term research on this, but studies have highlighted the emotional and psychological distress of non-voluntary early career termination (e.g. Blakelock, Chen, and Prescott 2016; McGlinchey et al. 2022; Wippert and Wippert 2008, 2010). The case of Jeremy Witsen, mentioned above, is a tragic example of this. Part of the issue is that the dedication TMPS requires tends to foreclose academic success and the development of other talents, making it difficult to transition into an alternative career. This is problematic because, as Feinberg has argued, children should be raised in a way that provides them with an adequate array of life-options when entering adulthood. Excessive focus on the development of a single talent may well undermine this.⁸

A different cost applies to children who *do* succeed. Although there are questions about the reliability of the data, there is some evidence that elite

athletes have considerably higher rates of common mental disorders, such as depression and anxiety, than the general population (Foskett and Longstaff 2018; Rice et al. 2016). This is likely due to the significant competitive pressures, and increasingly the torrent of criticism and abuse, that they are subject to. Sportspeople can also experience significant issues after retirement (e.g. Gouttebarga et al. 2019; Haslam et al. 2021; Mannes et al. 2019), with a much higher percentage of them experiencing mental health issues compared with retirement from other forms areas of work. Many sportspeople experience substantial identity loss after career termination, as they have given everything to their chosen activity and defined themselves in terms of it. There are high levels of gambling, substance abuse and depression amongst former sportspeople. Finally, they are at much higher risk of neurodegenerative disease than much of the rest of the population, with many of them experiencing other serious physical issues as a result of pushing their bodies to, and often beyond, their physical limits (compounded by the extensive use of drugs to manage, and to play through, injuries).

Weighing up the costs

These are substantial costs that push strongly against TMPS. They will not apply to all children equally, but most of them are likely to apply to most children. Most of them will also apply more the earlier and the longer a child is engaged in TMPS. How should these costs be weighed against the possible benefits/rewards of TMPS?

The first factor to consider is the probability of success. Farrey states that in the United States, the odds of a child making a living as an athlete are roughly one in 13,333 (Farrey 2008, 32). According to one study from 2016, 1 in 4,233 high school American football players will be drafted to the professional league. For men's basketball the figure is 1 in 11,771, for women's basketball it is 1 in 13,015, for men's baseball it is 1 in 659 and for men's ice hockey it is 1 in 598 (Kerr-Dineen 2016). Data from 10 years ago show that the percentage of United States male college players who become professional is 1.7% for American football, 1.3% for ice-hockey and 1.2% for baseball (Manfred 2012). It is reasonable to assume the figures today are similar or even smaller. In the UK, roughly 1.5 million boys who football at an organised club level and, in 2011, 13612 boys were in the professional football academy system. Around 180 of them will be signed by a Premier League club, a success rate of 0.012% (Calvin 2018). the age of four eight percent of players who are awarded an academy scholarship by an English football club at the age of sixteen are no longer playing in the top five tiers of English football at the age of eighteen (McGlinchey et al. 2022). Out of the many tens or hundreds of thousands of aspiring footballers, fewer than 1% will have anything approaching a successful career.

In short, the odds of making it professionally in many sports are staggeringly low. Even when one is successful, the length of one's career is typically very short. The average career in America's National Football League is 3.3 years, and the average English football league career is around eight years. This means that almost all children engaged in TMPS are sacrificing significant childhood goods for extremely improbable and short-lived professional success. However, how much the sacrifice of childhood goods matters – specifically, how great a sacrifice it is – will depend on (a) one's understanding of the nature of childhood goods; and (b) the value one assigns to childhood goods and childhood itself.

Starting with (a), it is likely to be the case that some childhood goods are 'distinctive', in the sense that they can only be enjoyed in childhood or that children are significantly better at accessing them. This means that if a child misses out on them, then they miss out on them for good. This makes the loss much more significant than if these goods can, or can easily, be enjoyed in adulthood. For example, Ferracioli argues that carefreeness is a good that is unique to childhood and that it is necessary for a child to lead a good life *qua* child. If she is right, then a childhood that lacks sufficient carefreeness cannot be a good childhood, *regardless* of what else it contains, and person cannot enjoy the good in adulthood. This makes TMPS's erosion of carefreeness very problematic. Similarly, unstructured play, a lack of responsibility and significant free time seem to be goods that are only, or primarily, good for children (or, at least, it is much easier for children to enjoy them than adults). Even for non-distinctive goods, such as spending time with friends and family, aspiring athletes clearly miss out on these far more than children who are not engaged in TMPS.

Turning to (b), Tomlin distinguishes several views about childhood and its value, and hence *how* bad it is for the value of a person's childhood to be diminished (Tomlin 2018). The 'Sapling View' of childhood considers it to be *inferior* to adulthood. Children are seen to be 'defective adults' and the role of parents and society is to turn them into adults. On this view, 'Childhood is a (comparatively) regrettable but ordinarily necessary stage on the way to personhood' (Tomlin 2018, 7). Just as saplings are inferior versions of fully-grown trees, so children are inferior versions of adults and childhood is an inferior state to adulthood. The 'Fruit View' of childhood considers it to be *superior* to adulthood. It is better to be a child than an adult and, therefore, it is unavoidable but regrettable that we become adults. (Tomlin calls it the 'Fruit View' because fruit rots with age). Finally, the 'Caterpillar View' is that childhood and adulthood are fundamentally different kinds of thing, neither of which is (necessarily) better than the other.

The Sapling View will deem childhood to be either dis-valuable or less valuable than adulthood. If one endorses this view, then one may be little troubled by the costs of TMPS, because missing out on a good childhood is not especially lamentable. Consider, in this regard, Slote's view that the goods

of childhood count less than the goods of adulthood. As he asserts, 'the facts of childhood simply don't enter with any great weight into our estimation of the (relative) goodness of total lives' (Slote 1983, 14). On his view, the goods of childhood count for less than the goods of adulthood, simply because they are *childhood* goods. This seems to imply that missing out on childhood goods is not very problematic, *especially* if doing so results in the enjoyment of adulthood goods. Indeed, even if it does not, then Slote's view deems this to matter little when assessing what a person's life has been like.

The Fruit View will be very troubled by TMPS, because it deems childhood to be especially valuable. Missing out on the goods of childhood involves missing out on the best part of one's life. The Caterpillar View will likely sit somewhere between the other two views. It will assert that the loss of childhood goods is bad, because childhood is valuable, but it is not committed to an account of *how* valuable it is. However, what it will insist is that the costs of TMPS are real losses that cannot be compensated for by goods enjoyed in adulthood. This is because 'child' and 'adult' are fundamentally different states of being with their own welfare conditions, just as the caterpillar and the butterfly are two fundamentally different states of being. The caterpillar is not a superior or inferior version of the butterfly, and vice-versa. The same is true, *mutatis mutandis*, of children and adults. If this is right, then TMPS is bad for the child simpliciter, because the value of childhood – and hence the loss of childhood goods – is not judged in relation to adulthood.

I think that the Caterpillar View is correct and hence I think that missing out on childhood goods is a significant loss. Indeed, as Gheaus has argued, it is important that children enjoy the goods of childhood, *even if* it means that they miss out, or are more likely to miss out, on certain goods in adulthood: if it is desirable that we start life as children, then it is important that we enjoy the things that make for a good childhood even if not all these things will also be conducive to a good adulthood – indeed, even if enjoying the goods of childhood was to jeopardise some of the goods of adulthood (Gheaus 2014, 36). Thus, children should enjoy a carefree childhood that contains considerable free time and unstructured play, *even if* this means that they are therefore very unlikely to achieve certain goods in adulthood that are obtained through professional success in particular activities.⁹ This claim pushes against Dixon's (admittedly qualified) defence of fulfilling a child's talent to try to ensure that the option of professional success is available to them.

The societal value of TMPS

Given the above, parents, concerned solely for the welfare of their child (both *qua* childhood and as a future adult), should avoid TMPS.¹⁰ However, it seems good *for society* that people try to maximise their talents. Bloom notes that their study of talent development began 'with the belief that the development of talent

provides . . . a source of great contributions to society' (Bloom 1985b, 6) Whether one loves football or cricket or ballet or jazz, the better people perform in these activities, then the more one tends to enjoy them.¹¹ The ever-improving levels of performance seem possible, at least in part, because of the extreme dedication of sportspeople, including the intensification of TMPS. Furthermore, many millions of people support sports teams. They want their team to have the best players. One way this is done is through the competitive academy system. In short, many people like, and benefit from, other people excelling at things, not least professional activities like sport, music, dance, etc.

The competitive way that most of these activities are structured requires TMPS. Consequently, if we want people to excel as professionals in these sorts of activities, we indirectly require that parents try to maximise their children's talents. Society as a whole benefits from this, both as an agglomeration of individual interests and as a collective, e.g. when its national teams or national representatives succeed. This means that a parent wants *other* parents to allow their children to try to maximise their talent. However, each parent has very good reason *not* to do this for their child. Each parent wants other parents to do what they, qua parent, ought not to do. Indeed, a parent of a talent child has good reason, qua parent, not to engage in TMPS, while they may, qua football fan and patriot, want their child to become the next Harry Kane.

It might be assumed that a way to mitigate this problem is to allow only those who are guaranteed to succeed to undergo TMPS. This would prevent thousands upon thousands of children who will not succeed giving up so much for so little. However, the problem is that one cannot determine which children at, say, the age of eight or ten, will go on to be amongst the very best. Some of the most promising at that age will plateau or even decline. Some of the less promising in an academy may flourish from the age of 13. One reason for this is the differences in bodily development; another reason is that the psychological characteristics required for success may only emerge as children progress through their teenage years. This inability to predict who will make it as a professional means that *all* children who demonstrate sufficient promise at a young age need to undergo TMPS, so those who will be the best can then emerge. Thus, it seems that we need to accept the failure of thousands for the success of the few.

Dissolving the dilemma?

Of course, many of the costs of TMPS can be reduced, perhaps quite significantly, by regulating how childhood talent is developed. We could ban sporting academies, or restrict access to them until the child is, say, 15, or we could cap the number of hours per week a child can spend at them.¹² We can take steps to de-emphasise competition in youth sports, or even try to eliminate it all together.¹³ I think measures like these are needed. They would enable children

to enjoy more childhood goods. They will be able to spend more time studying and thus have a wider array of options if they do fail in their chosen activity. Their identity/sense of self will be less invested in this one activity. This may well result in professionals in these activities being less excellent than they could be. I would not mind this, for they would still be excellent, but I think it would have to be accepted as a cost, no matter how small.

However, the nature of professional sport pushes strongly against this happening, especially in countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom, where sports are a huge business and aspiring athletes are commodities to be exploited (Calvin 2018; Farrey 2008). Clubs want the best youth players, which means training them more from an earlier age. The arms race of youth development that shows little sign of abating. The problem is such that some people have described elite youth sports as a form of child labour (Donnelly and Petherick 2004, 312). The system itself fosters the dilemma of TMPS and it is very hard to see a way that the system can be changed to any significant degree. Indeed, it is likely to only get worse, as more aspire to succeed, more is demanded of professionals and the rewards of professionalism become more lucrative. Sadly, this race is fuelled by some – perhaps many – parents, who push their children to try to succeed, regardless of (or relatively indifferent to) the costs this imposes on the child. Some parents may even believe that this is in the best interests of their child, perhaps because they endorse the ‘sapling view’ of childhood and/or they think that the chance of success is worth it. I hope to have shown that these parents are wrong to think this.

Thus, as things are and are likely to be in the future, parents should not permit their children to engage in TMPS. The costs are too great and their duties as parents outweigh any other reasons they may have for wanting their children to maximise their potential and to enjoy a professional sporting career. Even if things change and TMPS becomes much less demanding and intensive, then I think that it still might be too costly. The time and dedication required to *maximise* talent, sporting or otherwise, will, as a rule, prevent children from enjoying sufficient free time, unstructured play, carefreeness, and parental and peer relationships. Consequently, regardless of the nature of the system/the process of talent maximisation, I think that parents should not subject their children to it.

Notes

1. By ‘professional success’ I mean being amongst the very best exponents of that activity – typically, amongst the very best in *the world* – and that activity being one’s sole, or at least primary, form of employment/income.
2. However, the evidence for this is mixed, at best (Gould and Carson 2008; Power and Kristin 2014). Indeed, there is a worry that the prevalence of cheating in sport and the idea of ‘winning at all costs’ can be bad for people’s moral character.

3. His focus is on children achieving 'self-fulfilment', but he does also note the value of keeping the option of professional success alive and both involve talent maximisation.
4. At the very least, he says that it may well be 'rational' to try to fulfil the potential of very talented children (Dixon 2007, 155).
5. As a reviewer suggests, an additional downside of this focus on competitive sporting success and talent maximisation is that children who are merely 'good' may be neglected or ignored altogether by families or youth sport associations, because they do not have the prospect of succeeding at the highest level. Children may drop out of sports because of this, thus missing out on the benefits it can offer and feeling inadequate because they are not truly excellent.
6. For further evidence of the intense competitiveness and, sometimes, aggression, instilled in young sportspeople, see Farrey (2008).
7. Both in the sense that sport can be a crucial source of *fun* and *play*, and because it prevents children from obtaining these goods from other activities.
8. Although see Dixon (2007) for a discussion of this. It is possible that TMPS fosters a set of skills that enable these children to transition easily into alternative, valued careers. However, (a) I cannot find evidence for this; (b) the difficulties experienced by children who do not succeed provides evidence to the contrary; and (c) these skills can be developed in other, less problematic ways.
9. Crucially, they can enjoy all the benefits of participating in sport, even spending a lot of time playing sport or developing other talents, without having to commit to TMPS. This provides children with the best of both worlds.
10. Again, I do not think that there any benefits of TMPS, in terms of preparing a child for adulthood, that cannot be obtained through other, less costly, ways (assuming that there are such benefits).
11. Insofar as one appreciates the skill with which these activities are performed. One might enjoy watching baseball purely to get drunk and cheer.
12. There are youth sports systems that regulate the amount of time children spend playing the sport, with a strong emphasis on sport as fun. A good example of this is the French football system (Farrey 2008, 93–94).
13. Although Torres and Hager make a strong case for retaining a degree of competition in sport (Torres and Hager 2007).

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