How it started

Diversification in talent development

Providing a challenging & enjoyable sporting climate for our future champions

Why?
Trend in competitive sports is early specialization. This can help athletes to reach elite level, but also has a variety of risks:
• Decreased fun & enjoyment
• Overuse injuries
• Early dropout

Creating an exchange network
• Support coaches & athletes to add diversification to talent programs
• Sport teams can participate in monthly interdisciplinary training sessions
• Off-season training activities are focused on fun & sampling variety of sports with coaches from other clubs

For who?
• Players - program helps athletes to achieve their dreams of a successful, but also healthy & enjoyable sports career
• Coaches & club officials - interdisciplinary support & guidance for coaches on how to manage youth athletes athlete development, fitness, health & social skills

Expert validation & input
Product should be influenced & validated by coaches & club officials in performance-oriented sport environments
The soccer world championships, the summer and winter Olympics or other big sporting tournaments are some of the most watched events in the world (1,2). The participation in these events is only reserved for the best of the best. Athletes that have put in an extensive amount of training and sacrifice, just so they can participate and ultimately have a chance at a golden medal around their neck. With the athletic success comes big prestige for the athletes, their coaches and ultimately the sports association and countries they represent (3). Consequently, every year young athletes are aiming to reach or even beat the performance benchmarks set by their idols, and according to some there is only one way to get there: Hard work, hard work and hard work (4)!

Current practice: Early specialization
One of the most influential concepts about achieving elite performance in a domain is represented by the Expert Performance framework and the approach of deliberate practice by Ericsson et al. (5,6). According to this model, in order to reach an elite performance level, an athlete needs to be involved in approximately 10,000 hours of deliberate practice, which is characterized as a highly structured and goal-directed training of domain-specific skills, which usually comes without any immediate rewards (5). And this is often achieved by starting early and focusing on one domain, an approach that is referred to as “early specialization” (7,8). The implications of this theory on current practice in sports, can most commonly be seen in talent academies and sport associations who are aiming at selecting athletes earlier and earlier. There are examples of professional soccer clubs including under-5 teams in their academy, for example the English top club Manchester City (9), or national Tennis associations developing talent programs for players as young as 8 years (10). Despite there being a lack of early indicators of future elite performance (11), those evolving structures ultimately also influence the choice of aspiring athletes when it comes to either specializing early in their main sport or to sample a wider variety of disciplines.
Is early Specialization necessary?
While some studies have shown that the pathway of early specialization can lead to success at an elite sporting level (7), others have pointed to viable and potentially more promising alternatives (12). The Developmental Model of Sports Participation (DMSP) by Cote et al. (8) for example acknowledges that other pathways, such as early diversification might also lead to success at a mature age. Here, children do not focus on one sport only, but engage and sample a variety of different sports, a lot of which are peer-led activities that focus primarily on fun and enjoyment, rather than performance-oriented and deliberate practice (13). This pathway allows the young athletes to experience different sport settings, as well as different social environments where they acquire a wide range of skills and abilities. Some studies have shown that early samplers do not only have a promising chance at elite performance during adulthood (13,14), but also possess advantages over early specializers in the categories of physical fitness and gross motor coordination (15).

Reducing the risks of early specialization while still achieving elite performance
Even more crucial seems to be the reduction of the well-documented risks that athletes in the path of early specialization face. For one, there seems to be an increased risk of overuse injuries in early specializers, who are commonly found in gymnastics, figure skating and tennis, among other sports where the age of peak performance is earlier than in other disciplines (16-18). Additionally, a sense of reduced enjoyment and a higher chance of early dropout has been found in young athletes who focus early on only their main sport (19-22). Looking at an individual level these negative side-effects potentially lead to less-healthy athletes, while from a broader perspective they also cause a significant loss of talent for the sports clubs and associations.

Early diversification – A chance towards healthy and successful athletes
However, recent studies show that there is a way to possibly allow more athletes to have a healthy, happy and still high-performing career. Cote et al (19) for one suggests that the pathway of diversification, where an athlete samples a variety of sports from the age of six to twelve years, then step by step specializes and starts an investment in his/her main sport after the age of thirteen, promotes not only the athlete’s intrinsic motivation but is also linked to a longer sports career. This happens all while enabling young athletes to reach an elite performance level in sports where peak performance is reached after maturation. Likewise, the IOC consensus’ statement on youth athletic
development by Bergeron et al. (23) supports young athletes to participate in a variety of different sports-related activities. Furthermore, they encourage an interdisciplinary exchange in managing youth athlete’s athletic development, which also aims at increasing the athletic exposure between and within sports for coaches and sports organizations.

Play Up Groningen – The idea
Based on the scientific literature the idea for Play Up – Groningen, a cross-training network for sport teams in the city of Groningen, was born. Our project is aimed at all you coaches (and of course your sport teams) who are interested in following a more diversified approach for your training programs. Play Up will give you and your athletes the chance to acquire skills from other sports and be coached by experts from the field. But let us start from the beginning, because Play Up – Groningen is a project that supports you in two different ways.

The Play Up training sessions
First, we want to increase the diversification for your young athletes from the age of 6 to 13 years through our monthly interdisciplinary exchange program. The Play Up training sessions are the key component of our product, as they allow your athletes to experience early diversification within their regular sports environment before they start to truly specialize at the age of 14. This aims at promoting not only the athlete’s athletic skills and intrinsic motivation but is also linked to a longer sports career (19). To facilitate the implementation of our pilot project, we decided to start a rotation with only four teams, from the sports of Soccer, Basketball, Handball and Field Hockey, that is organized and communicated by the Play Up team. The rotation is simple (see the following graphic for an example) - During the Play Up training sessions, which are held during the first week of each month, the participating coaches visit one of the other sport teams, coaching them during their regular practice hours on their normal practice field, which aims at increasing the feasibility of the training sessions. Maaike Meijer, a track and field coach from the city of Groningen, confirms this approach in an interview by stating that “if we would ask children to visit the different sport facilities, it would demand a lot from the parents to organize their transport each time”.

PLAY UP SESSIONS
example of monthly rotation

U12 Soccer Team 1st session 2nd session 3rd session
Session coached by

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During the training sessions the focus is clearly put on learning and most of all enjoying a new sport in a safe and playful environment, which is enabled by the expert coach and helps athletes to acquire a broad set of relevant new skills. The Play Up training sessions can even be increased in frequency during the off-season, which happens from June to August in all four selected sports. This would result in a three-month sampling phase that is in line with the recommendations from the IOC consensus statement (23). A requirement for this expansion is that the initial sessions are well received by all participating teams and coaches, something that might be likely judging by the enthusiasm of coach Maaike Meijer. In our interview she emphasizes that “it is always really fun to see athletes enjoying a training session” and that “also coaches would enjoy teaching their sport to new athletes”.

The Play Up coaching workshops
The second pillar of our program will consist of the Play Up coaching workshop, which will aim at improving the interdisciplinary support and guidance in developing young athletes. The workshops will be held twice a year for the coaches of the participating sport clubs. As part of the events, that are guided by the Play Up team, coaches will have the opportunity to evaluate their season planning and assess them based on the degree of diversification and deliberate play that they incorporate. Additionally, the participants will be given the chance to create a better network and exchange concepts and ideas on how to develop successful and confident athletes in the various disciplines. The idea of an interdisciplinary network improving the quality of sport offers in Groningen was appreciated by Maaike Meijer, who added that “coaching workshops can be a lot of fun for the participants because it allows them to connect to other coaches and learn from them”. Additionally, the participants can also suggest topics that will be discussed during these meetings, which ensures that the Play Up concept evolves over time through the feedback of its participating teams and coaches.

The Play Up app
Of course, an initiative like Play Up, that connects teams from different sports and arranges interdisciplinary training sessions and workshops, requires some planning, organizing and most of all communication with all the respective members, which is where the Play Up App comes into play. The mobile application will serve as a calendar and communication tool for all coaches, parents and members of the involved teams. The calendar will include the scheduled training sessions for one’s own team, clearly highlighted when a cross-training session is planned. Likewise, the Play Up workshops will be scheduled through the app and members will be notified for all updates and new events via the app’s push notifications as well as via email. Additionally, a chat feature makes it easy for coaches and members to connect with one another and exchange information prior to each planned training session. This is how we make sure that the organization does not become an extra hassle, but actually improves the organization of all teams.

Our take-home message – Get involved
Naturally before exploring a new path, such as signing up your team for our Play Up initiative you, the coaches, might have some questions. We hope that we answered most of them in this article and that we have shown you that incorporating more early diversification into your training might not only lead to better sporting performance, but also has the potential to reduce overuse injuries and increase fun and longevity of your athletes’ sport careers. The Play Up training sessions and workshops give you and your athletes the opportunity to grow through the expertise of others and therefore expand your skills and knowledge. Ideally, we will collaborate with institutions such as the Huis voor der Sport Groningen and Sport Science & Innovation Groningen in the future, which will make our program available to more teams in Groningen. However, if you are interested in Play Up now or potentially want to explore the possibilities in other cities you can contact us through playup.groningen@gmail.com.
References


ManCityAcademy (2018, May 4). Our Under-5 and Under-6 squads had a little bit of help in training from some familiar faces yesterday [Tweet]. Retrieved from https://twitter.com/ManCityAcademy/status/992385189363011584


