

# Controversy Regarding Early Specialization in Athletics

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## Abstract

The International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) has promoted a series of international competitions starting with children III category, meaning children between 7 and 8 years old, which inevitably determined the lowering of the selection age to 5-6, very small ages in the context in which great performances in athletics appear after the age of 20. If 20 years ago, being an athlete at child II category meant to participate in national triathlon or tetrathlon competitions, today there is a specialization on events, starting with the age of 7, but also participation in international competitions. Here it is enough to mention the International Relay Competition, organized annually in Thessaloniki, Greece, where category III children participate in the 8x50 m relay (4F+4M), category II children in the 5x80m (male and female), and category I children in 4x200m relays (male and female). This study was based on the working hypothesis stating that *the early specialization in athletics could reduce substantially the longevity of an athlete*. Such an early specialization has raised, however, a number of controversies among coaches. In this sense, the research objective was to find out the Romanian coaches' opinion in regards to the individual event competitions for all children categories.

The research methods used in this scientific endeavor were: the documentation method, the inquiry method, the observation method; the statistical-mathematical method of recording and interpreting the data. The study has confirmed partially the working hypothesis.

*Keywords: athlete, children, events*

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## 1. Introduction

The lowering of the minimal selection age is not a new thing, nationally or internationally. International competitions in many sports, for children of 8-9 years old, have made coaches reconfigure their entire selection system. A natural question arises, whether it is good to start going after elite results at such an early age. Apparently, Pierre de Coubertin's saying, that "it is important to participate, not to win", has lost its meaning, the tendency being to participate and to win.

In this study's authors' opinion, this is because the development of children is now more accelerated, and implicitly, their perceptiveness is higher, which leads to another possibility for them to adapt, from a motor and mental point of view. Many experts have tried to justify or explain the current trend of early start of children in professional sports. The introduction of an early training completes the other ideas in the professional literature. Thus, it is recommended that the "early instruction" have three goals "to guarantee that the long term training is properly initiated", "that it is conducted multilaterally", but also specifically at the same time, "according to the practiced sport" (Marrin and Nicolaus 2000, 104-107, as qtd in Vaida 2007). Children's training for elite performances is supported also by Drăgan., who emphasizes the following aspect: "it is well-known that motor habits are learned easier by children, who at certain ages possess motor skills that make them better for certain spots, thus increasing their chances for great performances" (Drăgan 1979; Drăgan 1982).

Weineck states that only a proper motor demand will determine a positive progress of the child's performances, because "the dimension and the functional capacity of the body depend 60-70% on genetics and 30-40% on the quantity and quality of practice" (Weineck 1983). According to Manno, "the bio-psycho-motor characteristics of children contraindicate the use of monotonous and prolonged training tasks" during prepuberty because of the characteristics of attention and motivation of this age group, which are marked also by the "necessity of stimulating most motor behaviors" (Manno 1996). Bompa is for the general physical training, writing that "the multilateral physical development of children constitutes the foundation of athletic training, the children being able to improve their athletic performance faster and better with it that without it" (Bompa 2002: 5).

## 2. Purpose, hypothesis, and research methods

This research is aimed at track and field teachers and coaches who train 6-7 year-old children. The purpose of this study was to find out whether the children's specialization on events is good for their age, and

whether the early selection has influenced certain quick top performances at age group I and age group II children.

This study was based on the working hypothesis stating that *the early specialization in athletics could reduce substantially the longevity of an athlete.*

In this study, the following research methods were used: the study of the scientific literature, the inquiry method (with a questionnaire as its instrument), and the statistical-mathematical method, for analyzing the data.

### 3. Research subjects

The research was conducted during the indoor competition season, between December 1, 2016 and March 30, 2017, and comprised 30 coaches from all over Romania who wished to participate in this study. The research consisted in applying a questionnaire containing 2 identification questions, 8 main closed questions, which had only yes or no answers, and 4 verification questions. The goal of the questionnaire was to identify the opinion of track and field teachers and coaches regarding the need to lower the minimal selection age for event specialization, starting with the age of 7-8.

### 4. Development of the research

As previously stated, the study was conducted during the winter competition season of 2016-2017, and the subjects were teachers and coaches who have participated in the competitions organized by the Romanian Athletics Federation (RAF) or by the Bacau County Direction for Youth and Sports in collaboration with the RAF. The contents of the applied questionnaire and the recorded results are presented in the table below (Table 1).

Table 1. *Questionnaire on the opinion of track and field teachers and coaches regarding the need to lower the minimal selection age for event specialization*

Please check the identification data below and answer honestly to the next questions:

1. Gender	M	F
2. Coaching experience	<10 years	>10 years

Question
3. Do you coach 6-7 years old children?
4. Was the emphasis in training children of this age on multilateral training?
5. Have you participated in competitions for smaller age categories (age category III and II children)?
6. Do you believe that the organization of competitions on individual track and field events is more useful than the ones organized on combined events, for children aged 7-8?
7. Do you think the early initiation in a track and field event is an advantage?
8. Did you have athletes who were selected at the age of 6-7 and who have left the professional sports before ending the junior stage?
9. If the answer to the previous question is YES, is the rate of the ones who have left early the professional sports higher than 30%?
10. Do you think it is an advantage to participate in individual events if the chance to win a place on the podium is higher?
11. Was the training of 6-7 year-old children focused on the event for which you think they have skills?
12. Would you agree to give up the early selection?
13. Do you think that a child selected at the age of 6 will have a long athletic career?
14. Do the professional satisfactions come quicker when you have your 6-7 year-old children ranked in the top three?

## 5. Results of the research

After applying the questionnaire, it can be said that the coaches' opinion is not categorically unanimous. After recording and centralizing the received answers, the results are as follows: out of 30 coaches, 22 were females (73.34%) and 8 were males (26.67%). Out of the same number of 30 coaches, 25 (83.34%) had more than 10 years of professional experience.

The answers to the main questions (no. 3-10) are presented in Table 2. Because 28 coaches have answered affirmatively to the first question, only these were ulteriorly analyzed.

Table 2. Answers to the questionnaire on the opinion of track and field teachers and coaches regarding the need to lower the minimal selection age for event specialization

Question	Answer YES	Percent %	Answer NO	Percent %
3. Do you coach 6-7 years old children?	28	93.33	2	6.67
4. Was the emphasis in training children of this age on multilateral training?	24	85.72	4	14.29
5. Have you participated in competitions for smaller age categories (age category III and II children)?	28	100	-	-
6. Do you believe that the organization of competitions on individual track and field events is more useful than the ones organized on combined events, for children aged 7-8?	16	57.15	12	42.86
7. Do you think the early initiation in a track and field event is an advantage?	18	64.29	10	35.71
8. Did you have athletes who were selected at the age of 6-7 and who have left the professional sports before ending the junior stage?	28	100	-	-
9. If the answer to the previous question is YES, is the rate of the ones who have left early the professional sports higher than 30%?	15	53.58	13	46.42
10. Do you think it is an advantage to participate in individual events if the chance to win a place on the podium is higher?	17	60.72	11	39.28

For a clearer emphasis of the results, the answers given to the main questions are represented graphically in the following figures. Thus, to the question referring to the type of training applied to 6-7 year-old children (Figure 1), 85.72% of the coaches have answered that multilateral training should be the basis for children's instruction. The discussions had with the coaches revealed that they believe the event participation must be done based on this general training, and not a special one.

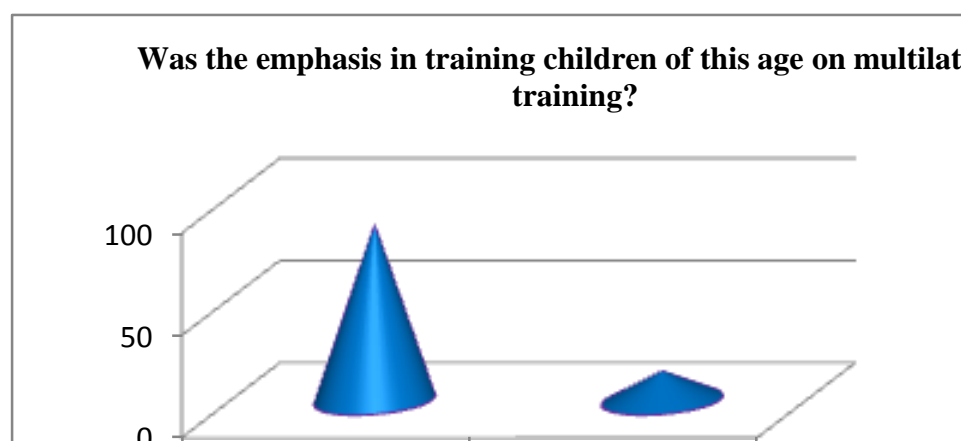


Figure 1. Answers to the question referring to the type of training applied to the 6-7 year-old children

Table 2 shows that the problem of organizing competitions on individual events is far from being solved. The percentages of the "for" and "against" people are relatively balanced: 57.15% are for, and 42.86% are against it (Figure 2).

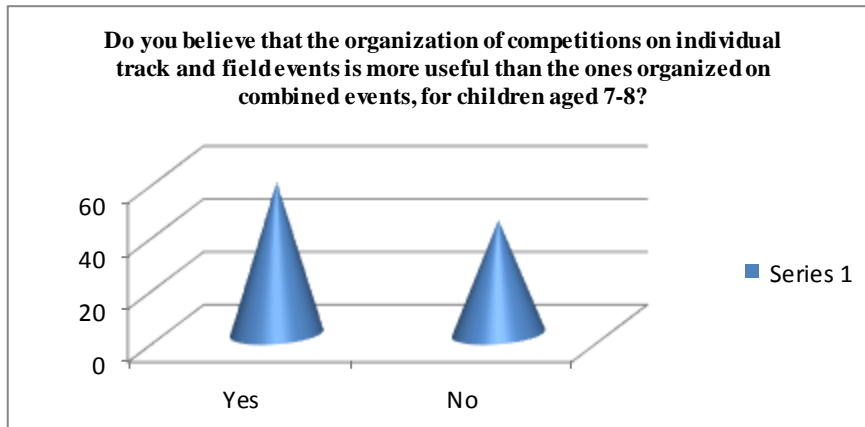


Figure 2. Answers to the question referring to the organization of track and field competitions on individual events

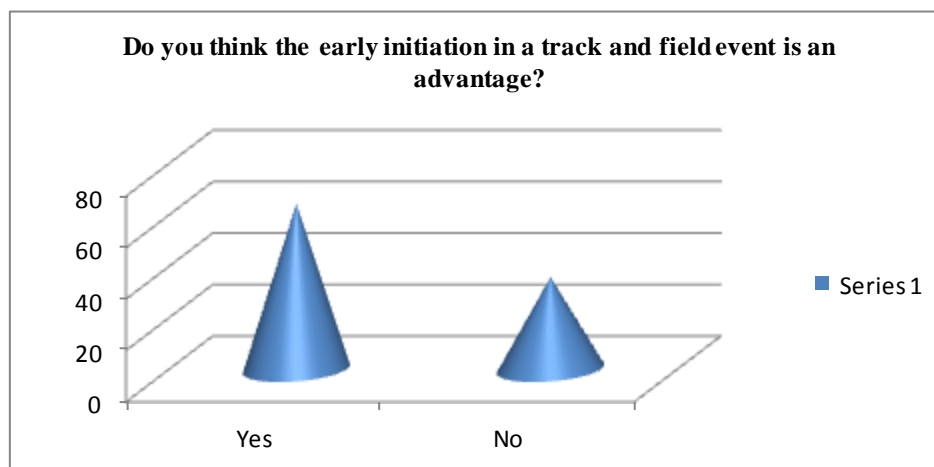


Figure 3 Answers to the question referring to the initiation to a track and field event

However, there are more people who think that the early initiation in a track and field event is an advantage, the rate being of 64.29% for it and 35.71% against it, who are convinced that the event specialization should be done later (Figure 3). The coaches motivated that early selection appeared mainly as a result that many sports have lowered the minimal selection age, thus any delay could mean losing many talented children.

An aspect that must be highlighted is represented by the answers to question 8, where all coaches (100%) said that they have trained children who were selected at a small age and have abandoned later their sports career before ending the junior stage, meaning around 11th or 12th grade. The teachers have justified this by the athletes' desire to train for another career than coaching or teaching physical education, feeling there are little incentives for them to remain in the system, or being advised negatively by their friends. It is concerning that the 30% rate of early leaving is found in 53.58% of the cases of the subject interviewed in this study (Figure 4).

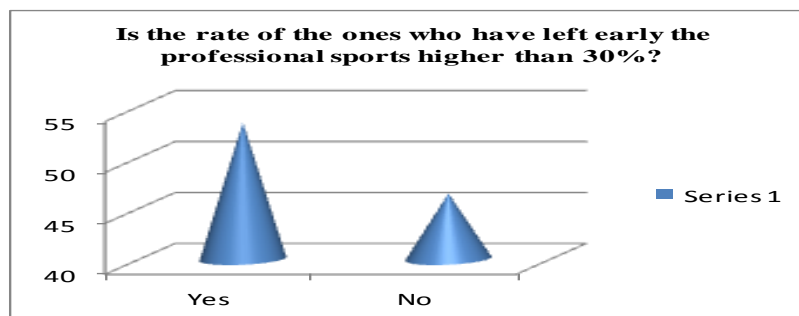


Figure 4 Answers to the question referring to the percentage of athletes giving up early to their professional athletic career

One of the advantages of participating in one or two individual events is that a higher number of children can win a place on the podium, which can bring them a greater satisfaction. This aspect results from the answers given to question 10, where 60.72% of the coaches have answered affirmatively (Figure 5).

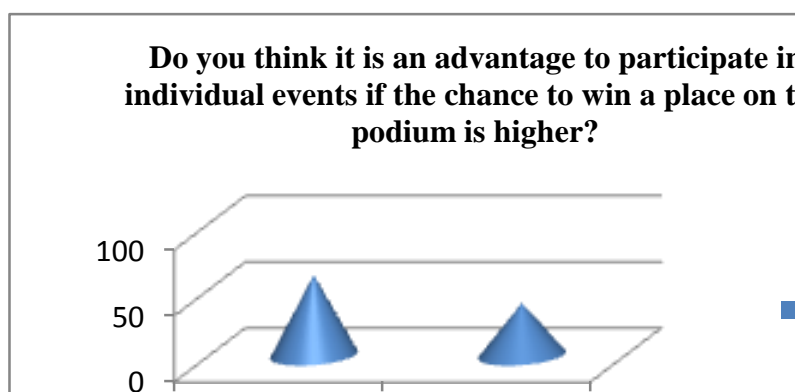


Figure 5 Answers to the question "Do you think it is an advantage to participate in individual events if the chance to win a place on the podium is higher?"

## 6. Conclusions

The study has partially confirmed the working hypothesis stating that *the early specialization in track and field could reduce substantially an athlete's longevity*, in the sense that a long term monitoring of the phenomenon is needed. This aspect is confirmed by the 28 coaches who said that they have trained talented children selected at the age of 6-7, who have won medals at the Children's National Championships, or the Junior National (even International) Championships, and who in the end have left their athletic career. Beside the arguments stated by the coaches, the authors of this study believe that early specialization is one of the factors leading to this abandonment, as a result of a training stage of 10-12 years, which leads to a "saturation" and a lack of patience in waiting for a great result. This leads to a lack of athletes at the Junior I or Senior National Championships and of course to poor results, and more recently to a lack of results at the World or European Championships or at the Olympic Games. In regards to the organization of children's competitions on individual events, the opinions remain divided and even controversial. It is interesting to note that the coaches/teachers with the highest coaching experience say that this approach is wrong, while the ones with less than 10 years of experience say the opposite thing. The authors of this study believe that this has a strong connection with the young coaches' desire to have good results as quickly as possible, the initial training stage of children being neglected or replaced with an unilateral training for one or two track and field events.

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