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## Early sport specialization doesn't always lead to success

### Building a strong athlete requires a well-rounded approach

By Adam Kreek, [CBC Sports](#) Posted: May 17, 2016 7:38 PM ET Last Updated: May 17, 2016 7:46 PM ET

If at first you don't succeed, try again — and then try something else.

Tim Rees, lead author of [The Great British Medallists Project](#), wasn't worried that his adage-debunking study would prove controversial. Rather, he was concerned that another academic would beat him to the punch.

Rees's research was kept secret for two years so that its financial backer, UK Sport, could implement the findings and build a competitive advantage against the rest of the world.

In the end, Rees's study took priority, and, in doing so, turned some conventional thoughts about sports development on its head.

## The 'practice' myth

The research rejects the idea that anyone can become an expert at anything simply by putting in enough time. "Practice doesn't make perfect," Rees said, which undermines another popular notion: That 10,000 hours, a number based on research by Anders Ericsson and popularized by author Malcolm Gladwell in his 2008 book *Outliers*, is the amount of practice time required to become an expert in any given endeavour.

To be fair, Gladwell's point has been widely misinterpreted. "When I wrote that," he said on a recent Freakonomics Radio podcast, "it never occurred to me for a moment that 10,000 hours would become the kind of meme that people took from the book."

Gladwell's goal was to communicate that success by a lone genius is a myth. To achieve great things you need social support, good luck, and must work extremely hard. "There is an incredibly prolonged period that is necessary for the incubation of genius, high performance and elite status," Gladwell said.

In fact, Rees discovered that you can become an expert in much less time. "There is no magic number. You could get a gold medal with only 4,500 hours of practice. You could practise for 10,000 hours and not have the genetics and not make it. We know genetics can put a ceiling on your potential."

Rees and his colleagues reviewed the best practices in talent identification and sports development, and validated

them against all existing scientific literature. Their findings were then systematically reviewed by international research experts, elite athletes, coaches, athlete development specialists, and UK Sport's senior management team.

## Dangers of burnout

Resist the pressure to specialize too early. It can help athletes early on, but there is no evidence that early success leads to success as a mature athlete.

"The evidence suggests that the earlier you go into a program, the earlier you get chucked out," said Rees. "There is more evidence that specializing and focusing on one sport too early can harm you." Many athletes who specialize in sport too young suffer physical injuries and psychological burnout.

Playing other sports and participating in a wider range of activities can make youngsters mentally and physically stronger. "You can develop decision-making skills, coordination, and teamwork skills from other activities," said Rees. "Don't get sucked into taking up only one sport too early."

## Helping guide the next generation

While reading the study, my thoughts turned to my role as a father. I aim to guide my children towards their best-possible life. So I asked Rees: Will the findings affect how he raises his 3-year-old? "My child is a bit young," he replied with a laugh. "If he does become interested in sport, I'll know what not to do. He sings a lot at the moment. Maybe he'll be a rock star when he's older and keep my wife and I in a comfortable lifestyle."

## Tim Rees: 3 tips for parents who want their children to succeed in sport

- 1. Protect play.** Carefully consider any opportunities that place your child in a singularly focused program at a young age.
- 2. Think big picture.** Here's a good question to ask: "What is in the best interest of my child in all areas of their life?"
- 3. Encourage exposure to other sports.** Most kids will find the sport that is genetically right for them by experimenting and seeing where they naturally excel.

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*What do you think is best for your kids? Send Adam Kreek a message on Twitter [@adamkreek](#). You can also find more tips to stay sporty with your kids [Don't Change Much website](#).*

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