

Managing the dominant early developer as a parent and coach

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I have recently been discussing with colleagues how to manage the smaller child, the child who is technically very good but struggles to have real success due to their physical capabilities at a young age. However, what if your child is the dominant player who experiences huge amounts of success?

I hear you say, 'how can that be a problem?' as you celebrate yet another winning weekend and trophy won.

Well it might be if not managed in the correct way by coaches and parents. It is all very well and good celebrating hat tricks of tries and goals every weekend and the child being the local hero often winning games single handedly whilst team mates and their parents stand and admire.

I am sure as a parent you would be incredibly proud of what you are watching and enjoying how much other parents congratulate you on the sideline for the achievements of your child. Totally understandable of course as that is human nature. BUT what is the long term impact of this?

At some point in the future other children will catch up physically, the sport will become more competitive, more players will join the system and the successes and high points whilst they still may be there will be a lot less than what was previously experienced.

As a parent and a coach we need to put all of this into perspective and always keep an eye on the long term athletic development and motivation of the child?

I have had first hand of experience of this with my own coaching this year. I have had a boy in my rugby side who is far more physically developed than the rest at 13 years of age so much so that he single handedly could ruin an afternoon for everyone involved in the experience, both for his own team and the opposition. As a coach it would have been really useful if he could have moved up a year and tested himself against older players. However, the system that we operate in that was not possible so I had to be creative whilst keeping him motivated.

I laid out my stall at the start of term that I would be coaching him as though he was 3ft 3 and 3 stone, focussing on every correct decision that he made and his skill and technical development as a player. I was not interested in how many tries he scored but needed him to be motivated to become a more technical and creative player, not relying on his physical force. Fortunately, with support from parents and buy in from the boy we have been able to achieve this and he has still been highly motivated at training. Of course there was some frustration when I removed him during matches to be fair to all the other players on the pitch but it remained the right decision.

One of the issues in the real world is that coaches focussing on the results as the success criteria as opposed to the long term development of the athlete and the development of other team mates will not manage this accordingly and will see winning by double figures a reflection of how good their coaching is. Coaches – I ask you to think about when you have such a player in your team?

For parents and coaches I have a number of tips below to help you in creating the best environment for the physically dominant child to help prepare them for the long term and give them the best chance of sporting success:

- **Ensure the child works as hard as possible at all times** – There is a danger that if the child is winning games easily or dominating training sessions that they do not feel that they need to try as

hard as their physical capabilities will take care of it.

- **Focus on skill development and technique** – Base all success criteria on work rate, acquiring skill and improved decision making as opposed to outcomes such as number of goals scored, or matches won.
- **Put them in a position to fail** – then help them in dealing with it. As they get older, there will be much less success and they need to be able to deal with it and see failure as a valuable learning opportunity.
- **Focus on their problem solving ability and understanding** – they will need to rely on this later on and many smaller less dominant children automatically get good at this as they cannot rely on their physical attributes.

I also have a few things that parents and coaches may want to try to avoid:

- **Try not to allow the child to become complacent** – always try to move them onto the next challenge quickly.
- **Don't describe them as talented** – they may start to believe you and become complacent.
- **Over hype their achievements** – later on they may struggle to live up to heightened expectations.
- **Focus on performance outcomes** – goals scored, winning etc.
- **Allow them to over exploit their physical ability** – others will catch up in the end.

My final thought is this, it is human nature to enjoy short term successes and we all want to see our children and players do brilliantly well. I know I do! BUT armed with a bit more knowledge we ask you to think about how it all fits into the long term bigger picture, particularly when dealing with the dominant early developer.

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