

# CAREER DEVELOPMENT OF ELITE ATHLETES WHO GRADUATED FROM AN ELITE SPORTS SCHOOL

Author:  
Stephanie De Croock

email:  
tsg64483@scarlet.be

Co-authors:  
De Bosscher, Veerle

University:  
Vrije universiteit Brussel

Faculty:  
physical education and physiotherapy

## Abstract

### Introduction

The way to the top for young talented athletes is long and complex. Research conducted on talented, elite, and former elite athletes has shown that a sports career not only occurs in different phases, but that these sport phases are parallel to, and influenced by the development of young talented athletes in other domains (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2003). Bloom (1985) differentiates three phases in an athletic career ('initiation phase', 'developmental phase' en 'phase of mastery'). Wylleman and Lavallee added a fourth phase 'discontinuation phase'. Each phase comes with normative transitions at the academic and vocational, psychosocial and psychological level of an athlete's development. An increased competition for elite sport success at the international stage (De Bosscher, Bingham, Shibli, van Bottenburg, & De Knop, 2008) and the fact that athletes start performing at the international level at younger ages (Wiersma, 2000), has led towards initiating systematic training and competition at an earlier age. This raises questions about the different transitions, early specialisation, dropout and development of general motor skills (van Bottenburg, 2009).

### Aim

This study aims to analyse the career development of elite athletes on a sport by sport basis, by applying the transition model of Wylleman and Lavallee (2003). It focuses in more depth on the career trajectory of elite athletes who graduated at elite sport schools.

### Method

Using a retrospective analysis a total of 408 (64%) elite athletes who had ever graduated from an elite sport school completed a written online survey about their career development, background characteristics, support services

and performance determining factors.

### Results

During the initiation phase, children often try various sports. This research shows that, as a young talent, 41% of the graduated athletes had practiced another sport alongside their current sport as an elite athlete. Several studies analysing the background of elite athletes show that the majority of them started in their favourite sport before the age of 12 (Unierzyski, 2002). This was confirmed in this study, but is very sport specific. The initiation stage started the earliest in tennis, gymnastics and swimming, between the ages of 5 to 7 and the latest (11 years) in cycling.

Thereafter, a period of talent development and elite sport practice follows, which requires an average of 8 to 10 years of intensive training and specific guidance (Bloom, 1985; Ericsson, 2003; Ericsson & Charness, 1994). As the talent development phase runs parallel to, and is influenced by, the educational and professional development of talented youngsters, and also because school attendance is compulsory, the Flemish elite sport schools were founded in 1998 with the objective of optimising the combination of elite sport and education. The average entry age at the elite sport school is 14 to 16 years. In sports requiring an early specialisation such as tennis and gymnastics, more than 50% of the athletes already enter at the age of 12 years while in cycling, 50% of the athletes enter at the age of 16 years. 60% (n=201) of all respondents believed that their entry age was just right whilst 24% considered it to be too late and 16% too early. On average a student spends 2.8 years at the elite sport school.

Investigating the moment at which athletes leave the elite sport school shows that 41% (n=133) dropped out prematurely at an average age of 15.5 years.

The next step is the Perfection phase, which is only achieved by a few elite athletes. There are only a limited amount of sports in which elite athletes can make a living and of all graduated elite athletes, 11% (n=19) reported themselves to be full time athletes whilst 73% (n=129) were combining elite sports with either half or full time work or studies.

### Discussion

The main point of note in this study is that the impact of an elite sport school in Flanders on the overall career of an elite athlete should not be underestimated nor overrated. Notwithstanding the fact that elite sport schools are an adequate solution for the problem of the overlap of primary/secondary education with the initiation and development phase, and thus the Flemish government spends large amounts of money to improve quality in these schools, extra attention should also be paid to the quality delivered in talent development programmes in sports clubs. Furthermore talent development programmes cannot be generalised for all sports. Since young talents come in contact with their sport at an increasingly younger age, an optimum talent detection and development system, including high quality sport specific guidance, remains of crucial importance.

References:

- Bloom, B.S. (1985), *Developing talent in young people*, Balantine, New York
- De Bosscher, V., Bingham, J., Shibli, S., van Bottenburg, M., De Knop, P. (2008). A global sporting arms race. An international comparative study on sports policy factors leading to international sporting success. Aachen, DE: Meyer & Meyer.
- Ericsson, K.A. (2003). Development of Elite performance and Deliberate Practice: An update from the perspective of the expert performance approach. In K. Strarke & K.A. Ericsson. *Expert Performance in Sport. Advances in research on Sport Expertise* (pp49-55). Illinois, Champaign IL: Human Kinetics
- Ericsson, K.A., & Charness, N. (1994). Expert performance. Its structure and acquisition. *American Psychologist*, 725-747
- Smit, S. (2002). 'Previous sport participation of elite sportsmen and sportswomen'. Uitkomsten van 'Sport for all and elite sport: rivals or partners?', het 9e World Sport for All Congress, IOC, Arnhem, p 25.
- Unierzyski, P. (2002), 'Why some good juniors succeeded and some other did not. Retrospective analysis of players born in 1981-1983'. Uitkomsten van het 25e European Coach Symposium. 'The Coaches Workshop for Europe'. Tennis Europe, Vale do Lobo, p 1-6
- Wylleman, P., & Lavallee, D. (2003). A developmental perspective on transitions faced by athletes. In M. Weiss (ED), *Developmental sport and exercise psychology: A lifespan perspective*. Morgantown, WV: Fitness Information Technology.
- Van Bottenburg, M. (2009). *Op jacht naar goud. Het topsportklimaat in Nederland, 1998-2008. [the hunt for gold. The elite sport climate in the Netherlands, 1998-2008]*. Nieuwegein, NL: Arko Sports Media.