

# Research On Relative Age Effect Of Hungarian Elite Youth Soccer Players

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## Introduction

Among young Hungarian soccer players it is often, that they are twelve or twenty-four month older than each other in the same age group due to the wide selection period of the competition system. Soccer (and many other team sports) have age groups of a one or two year interval which can result in big differences in relative age. Conditional and coordinational abilities of young athletes are highly determined by the effect of acceleration or retardation which is not taken into consideration during such a long period (García-Álvarez & Salvadores, 2005).

When it comes to the selection of elite youth athletes, coaches favor the ones who are bigger, stronger and own better coordination skills. Many studies have shown that in youth national teams and in elite youth sports there are more athletes who were born in the first quarter of the year (January, February, March) or at the beginning of the age group (Delorme, Boiché & Raspaud, 2010; Helsen, van Winckel & Williams, 2005; Sherar, Baxter-Jones, Faulkner & Russell, 2007).

This phenomenon is the so called relative age effect (RAE), which was named by Barnsley, Thompson & Barnsley in 1985. The biggest problem with this type of selection is that the biological age is not taken into consideration, and the actual performance rises over the real talent. At the end this will be a self-fulfilling prophecy, because these young athletes get better coaches, training partners and better circumstances in general, so they will be better players too.

The aim of my study is to show that the relative age effect can be detected among elite youth soccer players in Hungary.

## Methods

The sample is the roster of the U17, U19 and U21 national teams of Hungary (n = 69). The data were tested with Statistica for Windows.

## Discussion

RAE can be detected in all observed age groups. Results are listed per quartiles of the year:

U21: 1.: 42,11%; 2.: 26,32%; 3.: 15,79%; 4.: 15,79%

U19: 1.: 22,22%; 2.: 50,00%; 3.: 27,78%; 4.: 0,00%

U17: 1.: 50,00%; 2.: 27,27%; 3.: 14,64%; 4.: 9,09%

All results show that only a very few players were born in the last quartile of the year. As a conclusion it can be stated, that relative age has a big influence on the selection of elite youth soccer players in Hungary, and the long interval of the age groups (two years) makes an unfair competition between the children. The presence of this tendency makes further studies of this topic necessary. Deeper contexts of the aspects of selection and specifics of different sports must be revealed. It is important to start a conversation with soccer coaches and the leaders of the coaching program at the soccer federation to expand this subject and see how can this perspective help by the selection of talents. Former studies in another sports can help, but we have to see the specifics of soccer too. It is also very important to monitor the abilities of the athletes and see when the advantages from RAE get less determinative and real talent shows its way, because at the adult level we do not see RAE. We have to find the point where it ends, and we have to make better decisions at the beginning of the system.

## References

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