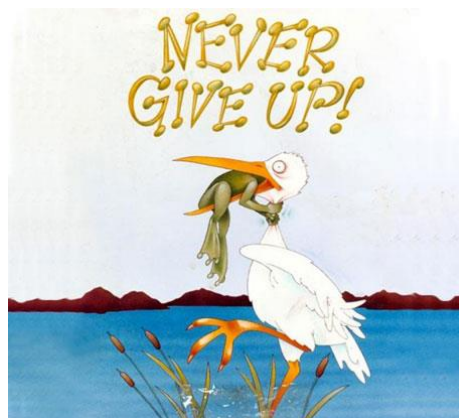


Early Star vs Late Bloomer

By Susan Ellis

Kristina Groves first took up the sport of speed skating at age 11 after being inspired by Canadian great, Gaetan Boucher.

“When she first started, I would say she wasn’t a natural but she was enthusiastic and enjoyed training and enjoyed working,” said Dave Morrison, one of Groves’ earlier coaches with the Pacers. Those around her could not have known the success that followed Groves when she first started in the sport. As Groves continued pushing herself and setting personal goals, coaches, as well as her family, started to see her focus and determination in improving.



“The difference with Kristina is that she has worked longer and harder than anybody and I think even from the beginning she enjoyed that process of working things out and training hard,” explained Morrison who coached her from age 14-18. *“I think that is why she has had the success that she has now.”* Read article (<http://www.profileswest.ca/index.php/profiles/31-kristina-groves-taking-her-last-lap>)

In fact, most people would not have predicted the success that Groves has had, being a knock kneed, gangly, slow tempo, young skater. Not exactly the ideal qualities of the making of a champion on ice. Well, all I can say is thank goodness for Kristina’s determination and never say I can’t attitude! Even though it took her 18 years of skating to win her first World Championship medal (bronze in the 3000m), Groves has gone on to become one of Canada’s biggest success stories, winning a total of 4 Olympic medals. She is a prime example of a skater who wasn’t exactly a child star who went on to become great later in her career. Never give up on your dreams!

More and more, the athletes who are standing on the podium at World championships and Olympic Games come from the “late maturer” category, yet it still seems we place a lot of emphasis on winning at an early age. Ya, I know, my last article talked about the need for teaching proper basics early, but that does not mean creating Olympic champions at age 10. All it means is ensuring age appropriate solid skating basics are taught. All too often though, an early bloomer is predicted to go on to greatness only to plateau a few years later, or the rest of the group eventually catches up with them. It’s one of the many reasons kids quit sports at an early age.

Kids mature and grow at different rates. In speed skating age class meets, how many times have you seen a 5’10” 12 year old with a mustache on the line with a kid who looks about 8 or 9 years old? Of course it does not guarantee the mustachioed big guy is going to beat the little tyke, but physically he does have an advantage. And if technique is equal in both, then chances are slim for the kid who is 4-5 years behind in

physical maturity. That's the beauty of ability competitions vs age class competitions – kids get to race against kids who are the same ability regardless of physical maturity. Yet, at the end of the year at provincials, states, Nationals, or even in places that don't run ability meets, kids are still sent out to get clobbered by more mature kids. And what do you tell your physically immature youngster? It's OK kid, you'll grow up someday....

Speed Skate Canada is trying to resolve this problem somewhat through its proposed Long Term Athlete Development Plan (<https://skatecanada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Skate-Canada-LTAD-Model-EN.pdf>) (LTAD) called Racing on Skates (https://www.speedskating.ca/sites/speedskating.ca/files/ssc_racing_on_skates_web.pdf). While some of the proposed changes are great, such as ability competitions for kids, it still does not address the problem all the way through adolescence, still addressing a plan by age rather than ability or a combination of age and ability. There are many young athletes who at age 14 are mentally and physically ready for the demands of a National championship, and many 16 year olds who aren't ready but may be ready in a year or two. The model needs to go further to address the needs of these two examples and not just lump athletes into a fancy 'trend' thing.

One part of the new model tries to address children's window for trainability of speed by limiting the distances to a 300 and 500 for 14 year old boys. Kids have natural endurance, so what's so wrong about making them skate a measly 1000m? Hopefully restricting this age group to a 300 and 500m race won't turn off your slow footed late bloomin' Kristina Groves types who will never be world 500m champion but skate a mean 1500. The model needs something more for every kid at every level.

The point is, there needs to be opportunity for both the late bloomer and the early maturer to have fun and experience success at their own level. So why not a National Championship for athletes with a time of, say, under 50 for the 500 in Short Track and Regional or National Jamboree/Festival/ Skills event for kids over 50 seconds; or even a combination of both at the upper level of a Jamboree or the lower level of a Nationals. If this helps keep the late bloomer in the sport a few more years because they have something to look forward to we may end up with more Kristina Groves later on. This also allows some of the younger skaters around 13-15 years old who are ready for advanced competition to get the thrills they are looking for. Some skaters are even competing in 1000m and 1500m at Junior World Championships by the time they are 15, and Olympic Games at 17, so I really don't see how overly restricting these above average performers will help their overall development either. For sure minimum age requirements are in most sports for good reason, and these need to be respected, while still nurturing the talents of all levels of athletes.

In an athlete's development there are optimal 'windows of trainability'. While the proposed new LTAD plan does a good job of trying to address these windows of opportunity, they may just be taking away other opportunities for kids to develop in areas which may ultimately be their forte if given the chance.

Here is a case in point: Watch this video (<https://breakingmuscle.com/fitness/friday-flicks-an-11-year-old-with-a-450-mile-and-basketball-genius>) about a kid named Jashaun Agosto.

Notice that this kid is multi-talented, yet people already have him pegged for the NBA. (Update 2019 – Jashaun is playing for a small college team and is not the super star he was touted to be although he is still very good. He remains undrafted by the NBA.) Perhaps his true strength and ultimate forte will be running the mile, or running the 100m, or some other sport he may try. With this kid's hand-eye co-ordination, speed, natural endurance, anything is possible.

Now just imagine if we limit him to kiddie height nets, use kiddie size balls, let him run only 100m or less, would he still develop into the player he is expected to be? And does this mean the kids who are on the smaller nets, balls, distances, etc, will develop better skills than him?

There two things that disturb me about this boy's talent though:

1. The amount of time he spends honing just his basketball skills, although he does participate in track as well.
2. Even though his father says he doesn't push him and that Jashaun looks to him for guidance and help, it could be just Jashaun's way of ensuring approval from his dad. Sorry parents, I've seen it so many times that you say it's not you who wants it, it's your child, but the kid only does it because it gets your attention at an age when they most need it. I'm not saying that's what's happening here at all, but just throwing it out there for you parents to consider when 'helping' your early bloomer.

But just as Jashaun Agosto is at the extreme end of the 'talented' scale, there are probably thousands of kids who are considered not to be athletically talented. 2006 Olympic discus gold medalist Gerd Kanter was one such athlete. Many coaches deemed him talentless. When he was a junior, people laughed in his face when he said that one day he would throw 70 meters. In his book *Everything Is Possible* he writes "Don't lose hope. Dream of great results and work hard to achieve your dreams."

In the book *The Swim Coaching Bible*, coach Bill Sweetenham says "I have taught thousands of athletes over a 25-year period, yet I have never coached an untalented athlete. What is talent? Talent is a combination of physical and mental skills, some of which are trainable and some are not. Each athlete is a special person possessing various levels of talent and potential in different areas."

The bottom line here is, whether you have a child who is a young super star or a youngster who is struggling just to keep up with their peers, whatever talent they have needs to be nurtured in their own special way. Coaches and parents need to look closely at the long term development of each individual and find ways to continually inspire, and create a successful learning environment that not only nurtures the athletic talent of the child but also their physical and psychological well-being.

One major reason for athletes dropping out of individual sports is their self-concept. These are usually the less talented athletes who know they are not in the same ballpark as their peers, and the situation is further compounded by lack of attention from the coach. You know – the coach who only pays attention to the ‘good’ athletes, to the coach’s kid, to the friend’s kid.... Parents, if this is your child who is not getting the attention they should have, encourage your child to ask the coach a question at each session. Don’t just sit back and ‘take it’. By rehearsing a ‘question of the day’ with your child, it brings the coach’s attention to him or her. And encourage them to keep asking at every session.

Whatever level your child is at, always encourage pride in effort, dedication and sportsmanship. These are the things that will help your child athlete continue to enjoy sport for a long time.

“Don’t get too caught up in winning medals and getting ‘good results’. But focus on learning good technique, training hard and developing a good work ethic. I wasn’t very good or fast when I was young but I really loved to skate and learned to work hard and be patient. Listen to your coach, always, always, always respect your competitors, be gracious in victory and in defeat and never stop getting better.” ~ Kristina Groves

Further reading:

Endurance Training For Children

(<https://www.brianmac.co.uk/articles/scni4a5.htm>)

The Early and Late Maturer

(http://www.pelinks4u.org/articles/darden/The_Early_and_Late_Maturer.htm)

Parenting Elite Athletes Center

(<https://www.momsteam.com/successful-parenting/parenting-elite-athletes>)