

Teaching Less... But Learning More: Making Some Tough Decisions in Secondary Physical Education.



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Jon Poole

Teaching Less...But Learning More: Making Some Tough Decisions in Secondary Physical Education

By Jon Poole

The development of motor skill competence, in order to effectively participate in a variety of physical activities and sports, is a cornerstone of physical education. So much so that our professional association, the [National Association for Sport and Physical Education](#), lists it as the number one national standard defining what a student should know and be able to do as a result of participating in K-12 physical education. One could even argue that without some minimal level of physical competence, we cannot expect our students to be lifelong movers (and thus, be potentially less healthy than we would like). None of us typically enjoy or persist in activities in which we feel embarrassed by our lack of skill or understanding. I often joke with my students that despite having the last name of "Pool[e]," for example, I never learned to effectively breathe properly when swimming laps, and to this day I have zero interest in using swimming as a preferred form of exercise.

That leads, of course, to several obvious questions; 1) How much practice is needed to acquire a minimal level of skill competence?, 2) What can physical educators do to increase the chances of their students gaining that needed level of competence?, and 3) Is it really possible for schools to "produce" skillful movers who enjoy, and persist in leading physically active lifestyles?

The search for the answer to a seemingly simple first question of "How much practice is needed?" is a fascinating journey without a clear-cut final destination or answer. The initial follow-up answer is, "it all depends on what you are trying to accomplish."

Several academic researchers including Joseph Baker and Jean Cote of Queen's University, K. Anders Ericsson of Florida State University, Bruce Abernathy of the University of Queensland, and Janet Starkes of McMaster University, among others, have dedicated several decades trying to uncover the development of expertise in many fields including sport. Dr. Ericsson, for example, in his highly acclaimed sport science book, [The Road to Excellence](#) (1996), presented compelling evidence that it takes a minimum of 10+ years of intense involvement and deliberate practice to attain world-class performance levels. To put it another way, Dr. Ericsson argues that approximately 10,000 hours of training/practice is needed to develop expertise. This equates to roughly 25 hours of deliberate practice per week. Not surprising, but a clear investment of time and energy is needed. If a youngster and parents expect world-class performance, or even a college scholarship, then it's time to hire some additional coaching and provide some additional playing options. The NCAA published a report entitled, [Estimated Probability of Competing in Athletics Beyond the High School Interscholastic Level](#), which shares data reinforcing the notion that roughly 3% of high school athletes will compete in college, and

less than 1% of high school athletes in basketball and football will make it to a professional league.

We should all understand, however, that world-class athletes are rare and way beyond the scope of K-12 physical education. Yet, too often I do believe we are "expected" by too many in the public eye to be producing athletes to compete on varsity interscholastic teams during the middle and high school years. Too many parents still see physical educators as coaches who use PE time for attracting athletes to their afternoon sports. Yet, that's not really the question many of us want answered...we already know that producing athletic champions with too little equipment, too little time, too many students, and too little administrative support is unrealistic. We just want to know what we can do to give as many youngsters as possible a "fighting chance" to lead a physically active and enjoyable lifestyle.

So how do we answer question number two dealing with what a physical education teacher can do to help students develop sport competence? Researches Cote, Baker and Abernathy shared in the textbook, [Expert Performance in Sports: Advances in Research on Sport Expertise](#) (2003), edited by Professors Stark and Ericsson, provide a developmental approach to sport skill competence that mirrors the "Diamond-Shaped Curriculum" shared by authors Cathrine Himberg, Gayle Hutchinson, and John Rousell in [Teaching Secondary Physical Education: Preparing Adolescents to be Active for Life](#) (2003), George Graham, Shirley Ann Holt/Hale, and Melissa Parker in [Children Moving](#) (2007), and re-published in the teacher's guide for the [Physical Best Activity Series](#) from our National Association for Sport and Physical Education.

Essentially the younger elementary-aged years, of roughly 5-12 (grades K-6), are characterized as an opportunity to engage in more "play activities" where simply having fun with peer children is a primary goal as we want to encourage a joyful passion for movement. Fundamental movement skills such as throwing, catching, kicking, striking, running, and jumping are emphasized by teachers and coaches with opportunities to participate in many different sport activities is encouraged. Physical education teachers emphasize the development of skills which make-up more complex sports in later years. The Diamond-Shaped Curriculum refers to this as the "Building a Foundation" stage where young children should be provided a myriad of opportunities to throw and catch, for example, all different sized, shaped, and weighted objects. But as this is the bottom of the diamond shape, the focus is narrow (i.e., on fundamental movement skills).

Using the old rule of "grade level" for determining team size suggests that elementary students should rarely engage in team activities larger than a game of 6 versus 6. Additional players provide too much complexity and reduce individual practice opportunities as higher-skilled youngsters are less likely to pass an object (ball, flying disc, hockey puck, etc.) to lesser-skilled youngsters. Further, many team sports reward aggressive or assertive behavior that maybe very difficult for lower-skilled youngsters. Our undergraduate students in physical education at Radford University, for example, memorize the saying, "maximize small-sided modified activities and minimize full-sided traditional activities" to focus on lead-up games that do not require regulation rules, fields/courts, or equipment. Young children are encouraged to play numerous sports outside of school, and steer clear of early specialization unless their particular sports of choice (i.e., figure skating, gymnastics, etc.) are dominated by younger performers.

As youngsters age and develop more skill, the middle school-aged years of roughly 13-15 (grades 7-9) are characterized as having a wider focus (mirroring the diamond shape) with the primary goal of exposing young people to a wide variety of physical activities. Yet, those students interested in playing a varsity sport in high school are most likely participating in fewer sporting activities outside of school as we start to see greater specialization. The school PE curriculum, on the other hand, introduces more focused sport skills and concepts that lead to greater competence and confidence in participating. Physical educators, coaches, and parents should help these young people begin to select certain sport activities that they enjoy the most. The Diamond-Shaped Curriculum refers to this stage as "Exploring Possibilities" or "Sampling the Menu." One difficulty for middle school physical education teachers is weighing the desire to share as many physical activity options as possible with the need to have students demonstrate a level of physical competence needed to participate appropriately.

As the young people grow and develop into high school students of roughly 16+ years old (grades 10 & up), the expectation is that they are probably participating in fewer overall physical activities, but have focused on a few that they really enjoy and feel like they can perform proficiently. Physical education teachers are less task masters on skill development, but rather are leading their students to problem-solve and become more "self-managed" as these young people will soon be leaving the public school system and they need to be able to help themselves lead a physically active lifestyle. Since it is unrealistic to expect many young people to be proficient participants in many different sporting activities, the

Diamond Curriculum refers to this stage as "Choosing the Path" or "Developing Expertise" in a few activities that high school students feel like they can continue to participate in once they graduate.

The opportunity to make choices about which activities they participate in is critical in the success of this stage. This is why, in part, so many high school programs attempt to offer a multitude of lifetime activities such as tennis, golf, weight training, yoga, running, etc. and allow students to select several of their choice throughout the year. It is also when we typically see a reduction in offerings of traditional team sport activities such as football, softball, or soccer which are not widely played beyond high school for most adults. The Surgeon General's Report on Physical Activity and Health (1996) reminds us that less than 5% of adults over 30 years old participate in team sport activities.

The bottom line for many physical educators is the need to examine closely what we are offering our high school students, to see if we really need to be teaching less...but helping them learn more. That is, we need to be careful of trying to teach too much, when instead, we need to help secondary students gain the needed "expertise" to participate skillfully and joyfully, and persist in leading physically active lifestyles.

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