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**Elite Young Athletes –  
Biopsychosocial Approaches to Sporting Excellence**

**Children or athletes?  
Best practice for safeguarding elite young athletes**

Celia Brackenridge, Brunel University, UK [celia.brackenridge@brunel.ac.uk](mailto:celia.brackenridge@brunel.ac.uk)

## **Introduction**

According to Article 29 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, coaches, volunteers and professionals in sport are obliged to

... ensure that sport is practised in a culture of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, friendship and fair play among all people.”  
(cited in David, 2005: 226)

This sounds all very well - but how can universal principles be applied in countries around the globe that have such different cultural, political and educational histories?

One answer is that sport is a universal language, known and understood on a more or less global basis. Children certainly love to play: through play they learn social and physical skills, tolerance, discipline and respect for others. As they grow and mature, sport becomes arguably the most the natural expression of children’s playfulness. Many millions of children worldwide take part in some form of organized sport every week. Millions more participate informally in street games, spontaneous play sessions and casual ‘kickabouts’ with friends. Their love of sport, then, is reflected in the vast numbers who get involved and in the good things that they, themselves, associate with it. (See Table 1).

### **Table 1      What children like about sport**

(Source: CPSU (2006a) DVD *Our Voice in Sport*)

*Sport's really good 'cos it gets you active and it puts you into the community more* (Boy)

*It's not boring it's fun* (Boy)

*... and I like playing with my mates ...and while I'm playing I get to learn as well* (Girl)

*It keeps you fit and it's really enjoyable* (Boy)

*Setting your own goals and making friends* (Boy)

*You get the exhilaration from competing against everyone else* (Girl)

*It takes up most of my life* (Boy)

*I've made a lot of good friends playing sport* (Boy)

*I really get loads of enjoyment out of it* (Boy)

*We don't mind whether we win or lose, it's just playing that counts* (Girl)

**How children would feel without sport**

*If I didn't have sport I think it would be really dull and everyone would be really unhealthy* (Girl)

*My life would be very boring and I wouldn't have much to do* (Boy)

*It makes me happy playing sport* (Girl)

*My life would be a misery without sport – it would be horrible* (Boy)

My task today, however, is not to preach about the good in sport – for that is well documented elsewhere - but to raise some challenging issues to do with the elite potential of some young athletes, to consider how we can best safeguard their welfare in sport communities that are focussed on competitive success, and to do this from an interdisciplinary or biopsychosocial perspective. My own credentials in the physical sciences are somewhat aged now but I did spend a number of years studying neuroanatomy, biology and ethology which perhaps tempers some of my more recent sociologically deconstructionist tendencies.

In this talk, I will first examine the concept of 'safeguarding', which in the United Kingdom incorporates and extends what has previously been called 'child protection', and consider its purpose and practice in the realm of the elite young

athlete. I will draw extensively on my knowledge of the UK not only because it is familiar but also because I think that it has one of the most advanced systems in the world for child welfare in sport.

I will then ask why, if sport is a zero-sum activity in which there can be only one winner, does it matter that we pay attention to safeguarding? I will discuss how the age-related standards in sport might work against safeguarding principles and what this means for the elite young athlete. In so doing, I will consider the implications of all this for us as sport managers, teachers and coaches.

As a researcher, I am compelled to provide evidence for my argument about safeguarding in sport: whilst this is possible it is by no means easy since breaches of child welfare in sport have only recently been studied and documented systematically. I will draw from ongoing work with UNICEF to illustrate some of the key areas of violence to children in sport that might drive our safeguarding agenda with the elite child athlete. I will attempt to end on an optimistic and practical note by sharing some best practice examples of welfare provision in sport that might become models for adoption elsewhere.

## **What is safeguarding?**

In order to understand what safeguarding is and how it operates, it is first necessary to take a step back. History has shown us that children's sport has been largely modelled on adult forms and that the transition from novice to elite status follows a reasonably linear pathway. Most youngsters who show talent and achieve success early on proceed with their chosen sport, unless enticed to switch within performance families, from gymnastics to diving, for example, or from cycling or swimming into triathlon. I know of a young aspiring Olympic canoeist who 'retired' from a successful rugby football 'career' at the age of nine but he is the exception rather than the rule. In the main, success breeds success and it is easier for the elite young athlete to stay in the system than to drop out. But it is also clear that some elite young athletes succeed *despite* rather than

*because of* the sporting system. In other words, even if they are unhappy, there is no realistic possibility of such athletes retiring, dropping out, or switching to a different sport or to a less intense performance level. The reasons for this are many and complex. Both social and psychological forces are at play here. The social forces include: family pressures, community expectations, national or civic pride. The psychological forces include: sheer habit, fear of failure, desire for social approval or recognition, loss of identity, and fear of the unknown or of retribution.

Some elite child athletes suffer unhappiness because they are being harmed, either outside or inside their sport environment. For them, the perceived compulsion to remain in sport and yet to stay silent about their trauma can compound their feelings of inadequacy and alienation that have been generated by the abuse. What kind of harm or abuse is meant here? ‘Child abuse’ comprises physical, psychological and sexual abuse, neglect and bullying. ‘Child protection’ is the prevention of these abuses. UNICEF, with whom I have worked over the past two years, and to whom I will return later, use the term ‘violence’ as an umbrella term for all such harms and abuses to children (See Table 2).

**Table 2      Types of violence to children in sport**  
 (Source: Adapted from *Exercising Rights*, UNICEF Digest, in press)

|   |
|---|
| Discrimination and harassment on the basis of sex, race or sexual orientation |
| Sexual violence   |
| Groomed or forced sex/rape  |
| Use of pornography  |
| Sexual degradation  |
| Sexualised initiations, bullying and hazing                                   |
| Physical maltreatment:  |
| Overtraining  |
| Playing while injured   |
| Peer aggression   |
| Parental maltreatment   |
| Doping/drug abuse   |
| Alcohol abuse   |
| Emotional and psychological abuse   |
| Neglect   |
| Child labour and trafficking  |

Violence and abuse to children was recognised as a problem in the family only in the 1960s and 1970s after medical doctors detected physical signs such as bruising and internal injuries that were not consistent with accidental falls. They thus suspected that children were being 'battered' in their own homes by their own parents or relatives. This revelation shocked the public since it labelled a previously *private* matter as now a *public* concern. In so doing, it presented a challenge to the authority and autonomy of the family – or more accurately the father.

Some 25 years later in the UK, recognition of violence, abuse and harm to children within sport led to the establishment, in 2001, of a dedicated Child Protection in Sport Unit. This followed a series of public scandals during the 1990s – mainly about sexual abuse by male coaches of female and male athletes – and has been vindicated by the large workload that it has subsequently carried ([www.thecpsu.org.uk](http://www.thecpsu.org.uk)). There are interesting parallels with the exposure of domestic violence and child abuse in the family since the previously private world of the sports club, in which the coach - or more accurately the male coach - is traditionally all-powerful, has now been invaded by state agencies and thus opened up to public gaze.

'Welfare' is an umbrella term for the overall system of harm prevention, child protection, safety, social and educational services to which all children should be entitled under their human rights. It is a benign-sounding term but one that suffers somewhat from connotations of need and helplessness. For many in sport, welfare is the antipathy of the rugged individualism that they associate with striving for athletic success. But welfare is also a useful generic phrase describing the not only the nature of services for children but also the way in which they are delivered. In sport, providing for the welfare of the athlete requires us to integrate the delivery of their biopsychosocial needs and to regard them as whole people rather than simply performance machines.

The UK government has recently adopted an holistic approach to children under the policy banner *Every Child Matters* (ECM) (DfES, 2004). There are five outcomes under this strategic approach to children's services:

- to be healthy
- to stay safe
- to enjoy and achieve
- to make a positive contribution
- to achieve economic wellbeing

Note that this list includes a mixture of outcomes that are of both *intrinsic* benefit to the child (e.g. personal safety and enjoyment) and of *extrinsic* benefit for the state (e.g. make a positive contribution and achieve economic wellbeing). In the UK, all aspects of civil society that engage with children – whether from the public, private or voluntary sector, *including* sport - are now compelled to pursue these outcomes. This means that safeguarding children is *everyone's* responsibility and is no longer simply the preserve of social workers, teachers and the family.

The specific outcome concerned with safety is achieved through safeguarding, which comprises:

- protecting children from maltreatment
- preventing the impairment of children's health and development
- ensuring children are growing up in circumstances consistent with the provision of safe and effective care

To achieve this in practice, all organisations that deal with children – including sport organisations and their clubs – must work closely with families and young people themselves to minimise the risks of harm to children. Importantly, this policy imperative also requires agencies to act upon any concerns or suspicions about the welfare of a child. Safeguarding is therefore a *proactive* rather than a

reactive approach to child welfare. All suspicions that a child is being harmed, or might be a risk of harm, must be reported to the social services or the police authorities.

## **Why does safeguarding matter in sport?**

Safeguarding – or if you prefer the UNICEF term, violence prevention - matters because, without it, there is always a danger that the child's rights will be overlooked or even violated. All children, whether elite athletes or not, are rights bearers whose best interests are enshrined in the United National Convention on the Rights of the Child (David, 2005). This is much more than simply a piece of paper, espousing rights-related rhetoric. It is an agenda for change that applies to all aspects of civil society, sport included. It has been signed by all countries (bar the United States of America and Somalia) and its implementation is monitored through a global network of State and NGO mechanisms coordinated by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.

Sport is regarded by UNICEF as an especially powerful medium for realising the Millennium Development Goals, agreed at the United Nations Millennium Summit in September 2000 (United Nations, 2000). These are eight goals that the 192 member states of the United Nations aspire to achieve by the year 2015. Sport is thus conceived as a valuable vehicle for achieving organisational or *extrinsic* goals. Even so, it is vital that, the *intrinsic* merits of sport – pleasure, satisfaction, well-being, fun – are also recognised, for without them the flame of motivation and enthusiasm for sport will be extinguished.

There is another compelling reason why those of us working with elite child athletes should pay attention to the UNCRC. Sport is regularly held up as a special site of morality, loaded with expectations about fair play and ethical practice. It would therefore be especially hypocritical for sport to claim ethical

purity while, at the same time, perpetrating violence to children and violating their rights. If we want to espouse moral quality of sport then it behoves us to make every effort to train our young athletes within the moral framework that is reflected in the UNCRC.

You might argue that this can apply readily to children at the recreational level of participation but that, once elite status beckons, then the serious business of competitive success should supercede moral considerations. Notions of civic pride and national reputation are certainly strong discourses in the Olympic community and my own government has made much of seeking to recover its lost reputation in the global sporting landscape through the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games. I want to argue, however, that the story is more complex than this and that there are particular hazards for the elite child athlete that require us to pause before claiming the benefits of personal sacrifice through elite sport. In short, I want to ask whether the very notion of an 'elite child athlete' is a contradiction in terms?

### **Status confusion between “child” and “athlete”**

The age boundary between adult and child status is not universal. Despite UNICEF designating 'childhood' as below 18 years old, there are many different ages of consent across the world, ranging from 12 to 21, with further variations between males and females, heterosexuals and homosexuals (AVERT, 2007).

Within sport there are also many different age divisions, based not on legal but more usually on performance thresholds. What is a junior in one sport might represent a veteran in another, for example, but furious arguments usually break out when a young athlete below 'senior' age is debarred from competing against legitimately senior competitors. "If you're good enough, you're old enough" is the cry.

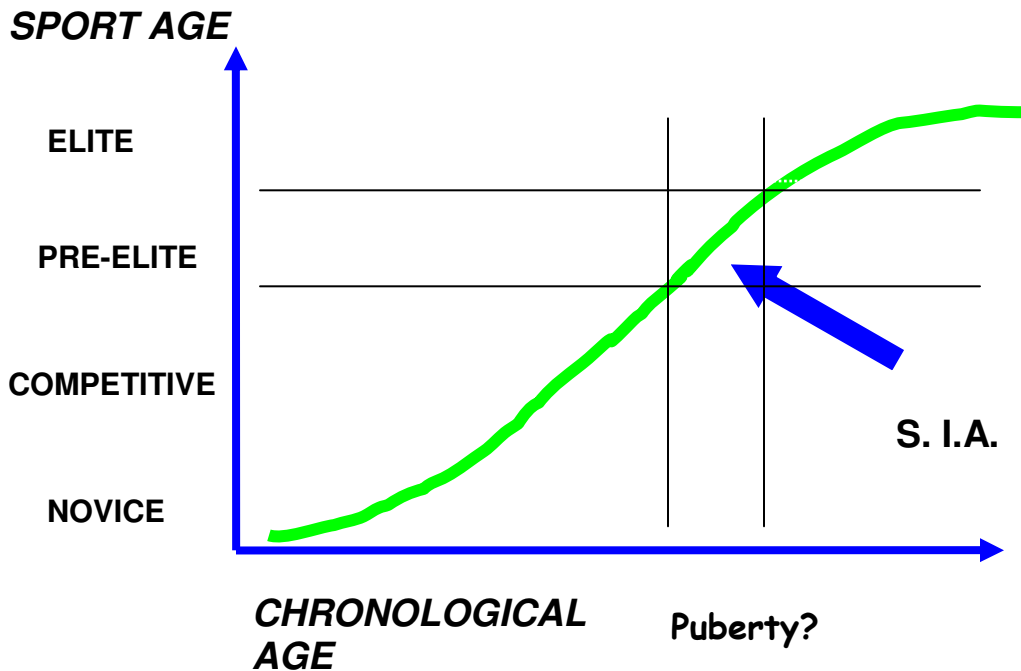


In early specialisation or early peaking sports, it is not uncommon for the young elite athlete to be treated like an adult, with requirements for frequent travel away from home or even overseas, having to adjust to a range of different cultural environments, money management and meeting important dignitaries. All this may be faced by elite young athletes as young as 12, 13 or 14 who are also balancing the demands of family, sport and schoolwork.

Conversely, in late peaking sports, elite athletes are often treated as if they were children – infantilised - with controls imposed over their diet, weight, training, sleep, and their social, financial and even sex lives. Chronological age has long been recognised by teachers, coaches and sport scientists as a very poor indicator of maturity. Despite development markers such as peak height velocity now being adopted instead of more basic growth indicators (Stafford and Balyi, 2005) some still argue that performance skill should be the only criterion in selection – again the argument goes “if you’re good enough, you’re old enough”. I want to suggest that this adage cannot be applied simplistically in sport if we are to take an holistic, biopsychosocial approach to the safeguarding and welfare of the elite young athlete. Performance itself is easily and externally benchmarked. Social, psychological, educational and relational maturity are not. This is not to suggest, I stress, that young athlete who demonstrates talent for elite sport should necessarily be barred from competing. Rather, their all-round welfare should be taken into consideration when plans are drawn up and decisions are made about their ‘sport career’.

Together with my colleague Professor Sandra Kirby from Canada, I have suggested that there may be particular age-related risks for the elite young athlete that require particular safeguarding precautions (Brackenridge and Kirby, 1997). We suggest that one way of avoiding the pitfalls associated with chronological age is to consider instead the young athlete’s ‘sport age’ (a term first coined by Sandra Kirby in her study of elite athlete retirement (Kirby, 1986) see Fig 1).

**Fig 1. Elite athlete vulnerability and the Stage of Imminent Achievement**  
 (Source: Brackenridge and Kirby, 1997)



What we have called the Stage of Imminent Achievement occurs just before peak performance: in some athletes the transition from the SIA to peak performance may last two or three years; in others it could pass in a matter of weeks or months. According to this hypothesis, the athlete is at heightened risk of abuse by sport authority figures, and particularly sexual abuse, in the period leading up to elite level. Why? Because, at this stage, after years of physical, psychological and financial investment in the sport, there is almost nothing to gain and everything to lose for the athlete who speaks out or complains about his or her treatment. One more step up leads to elite status and medal-winning opportunities. One complaint or disclosure of abuse can lead to exclusion, sanction or being dropped from the squad.

How do we measure when the SIA occurs, how long does it last, and is it the same duration for all athletes? Crudely, we calculate the SIA by looking at the mean peak performance age and working back to the time before the average age at which elite athletes are selected for the highest level. So, for example, if

the mean peak age for a sport is 22, and the average lowest and highest age of the elite squad in that sport is 18 and 24 years old respectively, then the SIA falls between about 15 or 16 up to 18 years old. For some early peaking sports this means that the SIA encompasses puberty, arguably exacerbating the status confusions that face the young athlete – including child v. adult, pre-elite v. elite, emerging sexuality and sexual identity, emotional and financial dependence on or independence from the family ... and so on.

In elite sport the technical brilliance of the elite child athlete too easily masks their status as child, such that we see them as ‘adult’. But age group boundaries are usually fixed in sport. True, some International Federations, worried about burnout among elite child athletes, have had the courage to raise their minimum age for international competition. But if we adhere to the current conventional wisdom in sport psychology, that to become elite one must undergo deliberate practice for 10,000 hours or 10 years (Eriksson et al., 1993), then we can see that the threat of burnout begins long before the SIA. Indeed, it is possible that, instead of the child athlete having one remote goal, such as an Olympic medal, we are actually seeing a series of SIAs at each level of selection and competition that the child experiences.

The UNCRC talks about two important concepts for us that, in my view, have yet to be adequately applied in sport. These are “evolving capacity” and “progressive autonomy” (David, 2005). This means that, rather than imposing absolute age boundaries or thresholds, relativity should be taken into account when deciding what a child is capable of. The difficulty with this for sport is that fairness would be almost impossible to measure. In golf, where the handicapping system allows age to be all-but-ignored, young and old can play together on an equitable basis. But for most sports our thirst for the absolute (fastest, highest, strongest) renders this impossible. Even if it were possible, we would be severely challenged to come up with measures of social, emotional and relational maturity that could be balanced in the equation with physical competence.

## Challenges to sport providers

What does all this mean for us as providers, managers, teachers and coaches of sport? Consider the following case studies – which are real reports from real sport events:

1. A 15-year-old male competitor tells you that he isn't motivated to train for the tournament, and he self harms [cuts himself]. He asks you not to tell anyone.
2. A female competitor aged twelve confides in you and tells you about her younger sisters, aged three and five, being raped by a gang of men who came into her village the previous night. She is upset and is frightened in case it happens to her.
3. A player under 18 talks with you about being abused by a family member when he does not perform well. He asks you not to tell anyone.
4. One of the young people on a school exchange from England tells you that one of the girls she is spending time with (as part of the exchange) has told her she was raped by her coach. She has asked you not tell any one.

These kinds of incidents can happen at any sport event, anywhere: very few countries yet have in place suitable policies, procedures and training programmes to prevent them. So, how should the coach of elite child athletes respond when faced with such situations? How can these situations be resolved? Can the coach do anything to prevent them happening?

In the UK, answers to these questions lie in the work of the Child Protection in Sport Unit ([www.thecpsu.org.uk](http://www.thecpsu.org.uk)). Its most recent publication is a six year *Strategy for Safeguarding Children and Young People in Sport* (CPSU, 2006b: 3) that has been adopted throughout the sport system and that endeavours to set out the safeguarding priorities for sport from recreational to elite level in the run

up to the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games. The *Strategy* (p. 3) says:

Over the last six years there has been growing recognition that only when they are free from harm are children and young people able to achieve through sport.

Before the Strategy only half of national governing bodies of sport (NGBs) had adopted a child protection policy. *National Standards for Safeguarding and Protecting Children in Sport* were introduced in 2003 and endorsed by the government (CPSU, 2003). By 2006, 45 state-funded NGBs and 29 county sports partnerships had achieved recognition at the first or preliminary level (of three) of these standards (CPSU, 2006b: 4). The full list of the Standards is:

- Policy
- Procedures and Systems
- Prevention
- Codes of Practice and Behaviour
- Equity
- Communication
- Education and Training
- Access to Advice and Support
- Implementation and Monitoring
- Influencing

The effect of these standards has been to raise sharply the awareness of sport organisations, coaches and teachers of the many different aspects of welfare that need to be provided if sport is to be safe for young athletes. The associated training that has been delivered to hundreds of thousands of coaches through the UK has also had a marked and beneficial impact on coaching practice (Woodhouse, 2001; Brackenridge et al., 2002, 2003; Brackenridge, 2006). I have to acknowledge, however, that *some* elite coaches and *some* sport managers

have been reluctant to accept these kinds of measures, arguing that they interfere with performance goals or that they apply only to the recreational level of sport (Collins, 2006). The fact remains, however, that the standards give us a clear roadmap for bringing the worlds of sport and child welfare together and of demonstrating in practice the values and principles to which signatories to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child have agreed.

The practical consequences of the safeguarding standards in the UK are that NGBs now have policies and procedures in place, have appointed designated welfare or child protection officers at national (and many at club) level and have a host of arrangements for enhancing the safety and wellbeing of young athletes. In parallel with this, event managers (for camps, tournaments and competitions) now have access to detailed guidance on planning and delivering safe sporting competitions such as the UK School Games, sport development and leadership camps and multi-sport events like the International Children's Games (Tiivas and Morton, 2003; Kinder et al., 2008). Minimum requirements for all sport venues include such things as:

- A written Welfare Plan
- Codes of Practice for all young people and staff members or volunteers engaged in the event/sessions
- Outlets and resources for counselling and support
- Transport and supervision procedures for children to get to and from the event/sessions
- Health and safety policy and procedures
- Substance misuse policy and procedures
- Photography and media policy and procedures
- Record-keeping procedures (incident forms, referrals, reports etc.)
- Medical forms for parents/carers and guardians to complete for all children involved in the programme/sessions
- Background/police (safeguarding) checks on all those working or volunteering and who will be in unsupervised contact with children

If we have in place all these regulations and procedures for safeguarding young elite athletes does this mean that the UK has a particularly bad record on child abuse and harm? Not so. What it means is that, along with colleagues in Australia ([www.ausport.com](http://www.ausport.com); Australian Sports Commission, 1998a-d), Canada ([www.CAAWS.com](http://www.CAAWS.com)), The Netherlands (Cense, 1997) and a few other countries, we have recognised a problem in sport and started to address it by conducting research, promoting advocacy and pursuing policy change. For all of us, perhaps the greatest challenge is to embed the principle of athlete participation, not in the physical sense that we all understand in sport but in the political sense as used by the UNCRC: that is, giving a voice to the child athlete, then listening and responding to that voice.

## Conclusions

The entire sports process for the ... child athlete should be pleasurable and fulfilling. (IOC, 2005)

The issue of harm to children in sport has been acknowledged by some supra-national organisations, such as the Council of Europe (Brackenridge and Fasting 1998 and 1999; Council of Europe, 2001), the European Sport Psychology Federation (European Federation of Sport Psychology, 2002), the International Olympic Committee ([www.olympic.org](http://www.olympic.org) 2005, 2007), and, most recently, UNICEF (in press). Recognition of this issue by such august organisations is of much more than just symbolic importance. It helps to bring the wider world of child welfare and safeguarding closer to the world of sport. It also helps to burst the social bubble that many sportspeople live inside, which prevents them from seeing problems with sport or from seeking expert help outside sport to solve these problems.

I have suggested that the UK government's policy outcomes for children under *Every Child Matters* (DfES, 2004) encompass a mix of vested interests:

- for the child athlete - providing personal safety, support and life chances
- for sport organisations - optimizing commodity value, commercial success and sustainability
- and for society - reducing worklessness and social disruption and thus benefitting the economy

Finding and maintaining a healthy balance within this mix is a challenge for all of us, especially those of us engaged in coaching or delivering elite sport success. The space within this mix for child-centred or even child-directed sport is very limited indeed but it is a space for which we all have responsibility.

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