



Exercises at the swimming pool.

In the case of “wild” sporting activity, the child’s time is given up entirely to the activity, as can be seen in the endless games of football young children play, followed by bicycle races and a swim in the river.

Today however, children’s discovery of sport has become increasingly different. It is often parents who take their children, when they are very young, to the swimming pool or to sports grounds or sports halls. Children’s first experience of sport thus takes place in the framework of an organized activity, which they perceive as a form of organization of their free time. By organizing sport for children, and often deciding for them, we unfortunately prevent them from managing their own play/sports time, thus denying them an early source of autonomy.

A first potential source of imbalance in the practice of sport by children is therefore linked to the urban society we live in. We need not regret the past; it is rather a question of knowing how to recreate this “wild ego” in our towns and in the country, where sport is increasingly based on organized leisure activities. Doing one sport is now the rule in clubs. Sports grounds are often on the outskirts of cities, are overcrowded and invariably enclosed, while recreational areas, parks or hard-packed surfaces are very few

Balance and imbalance in children's sport

and far between. How can we find the balance of a varied, spontaneous and, in some respects, unexpected and unpredictable approach to sport under such conditions?

Some interesting answers have already been suggested which take into account the need to recreate this “wild ego”. Marte and Notarnicola, the authors mentioned above, have shown that children who had benefited from experiences of the “wild ego” were considered by sports trainers to be more capable when they joined organized sport at 12-13. Their study concluded that no formal training, no matter how early in life it took place, could replace the primary apprenticeship of nature.

What measures should therefore be taken to lessen the handicap suffered by a society which reduces opportunities to acquire this “wild ego”? Here are some examples:

- increase the number of free access sports facilities, which encourage self-organization
- set up unstructured playing areas with little in the way of equipment

Two Italian psychologists, Vincenzo Marte and Giovanni Notarnicola, define the traditional multidisciplinary and spontaneous practice of sport by children - climbing trees, riding a bicycle along quiet roads, racing their friends across the fields - as an activity of the “wild ego”, a special activity of discovery and knowledge.

- establish areas where street sport can be practised
- support sports clubs which offer multidisciplinary sports training
- offer pre-school activity based on the principle of the discovery of different sports.

It is above all the responsibility of political, educational and sports authorities to reduce this first imbalance, by implementing this type of measure on a general basis.

For children, sport remains a special source of discovery and knowledge, no matter how much we limit and control the practice of early intensive training. Therein lies the second example of imbalance in children’s sport. We talk of early intensive training when sport is practised from the youngest possible age, sometimes even before the age of six, within an organized framework with a high degree of sporting specificity. When adult-style competitions are precociously introduced, the conditions which encourage a balanced development of the child through sport are no longer respected.



Two young football players.

Today, early intensive training is much more widely on offer. The result is that a considerable number of sports claim that they are forced to resort to this type of training because of what is called the “golden age” for the acquisition of motor habits. For it is unthinkable for a young skater or gymnast to miss this period; if they did so they would fall so far behind the best that they could never hope to catch up. Faced with this demand for precocity, which is the outcome of the work of specialists in motor activity and movement, it is all the more important that a safety net is put in place to maximize the benefits and minimize the disadvantages of such intensive training.

A concrete example of measures taken to rectify this situation is the Charter of Rights of the Child in Sport. In 1986, a group of experts composed of sports trainers and specialists on children’s sports, was commissioned to set up a teaching method for people responsible for children’s sport, especially children between six and 13 years old. The aim of their discussions was to raise the participants’ awareness of the

physiological and psychological burdens of organized sport.

What happens with very young children? Why do they abandon sport? The most common reason for leaving a sport is to change to another sport, which, in itself, is no bad thing. However, a child may leave sport because he believes that he has received too much criticism and too many negative appraisals. We know that young children, up to the age of 11-12, cannot gauge their own level of competence; they believe that making an effort is in itself a sign of competence. We also know that young children are particularly sensitive to criticism from adults or peers. Trainers must therefore pay particular attention to this aspect and avoid excessive criticism or any strategies that discriminate against the child: for example in team sports, naming “first choice” players and “reserves”. Motivated both by intrinsic and extrinsic factors, primary school children’s main desire is to have fun and to socialize. The desire to improve and become a good competitor will become more evident later.

This brief example shows that knowl-

edge of child development is indispensable for those who take care of children of this age. The Charter of Rights of the Child in Sport was thus created in 1988. It has 11 points, which we will present and discuss.

1. The right to play sport. No club should turn down a child who wants to practise a sport, whether or not he is talented or has the appropriate physique. It is up to the club and the coach to propose a suitable level for the child, in accordance with his capabilities. To reduce violence in sport we must promote fair play, which should be taught from the earliest possible age.

2. The right to have fun and to play like a child. This point highlights the fact that seven to eight-year old children have a different perception of play and fun from 12-13 year olds. Younger children are mainly concerned with discovering something, they constantly want to change the game they are playing, they invent new rules, etc. Preadolescents show a curiosity to learn, and demand competence from their trainer, who must be able to teach them the right skills. Training sessions should therefore be play-oriented and must be varied and spontaneous for the former. They should also be play-oriented for the latter, but more focused on learning sporting skills.

3. The right to benefit from a healthy environment. It would be unthinkable not to mention doping at this stage. There have been cases of baby-champions who have taken artificial substances to lose weight for artistic gymnastics. Such cases, which fortunately have been rare, are much less worrying than figures published in 1993 by the Canadian centre for drug-free sport (CCDS), which reveal that 83,000 11-18 year olds had used anabolic steroids during the course of the year preceding the sur-

vey. Even if doping below the ages of 14-15 is still a marginal problem, it should not be underestimated.

A trainer who is not forthcoming on the issue of doping can cause misunderstandings. Trainers must therefore take a decisive stance against doping and explain not only the ethical and medical, but also the psychological reasons for their point of view.

4. The right to be treated with dignity. This means, first of all, considering the child as a person “worthy of a relationship”. Figures gathered in Germany indicate that only 33% of children have trainers with whom they feel they can talk. This point of the Charter also mentions some disgraceful violations of children’s rights, which are positively hurtful to those who love sport and wish to promote it. I am referring to situations where children are considered as a source of income or as workers: jockeys in Indonesia or Pakistan, aged between five and ten years old, bought or even illegally forced to take part in camel races organized in the Persian Gulf area; transfers of 1 1-13 year old boy-footballers from Latin America to Europe, etc.

5. The right to be trained and surrounded by competent people. The emphasis here is on the quality of the training of trainers in the fields of physiology, psychology and teaching. The best trainers must therefore be put in charge of the youngest children, for in sport first experiences are important, indeed decisive, for subsequent development.

6. The right to training sessions adapted to individual needs. This point emphasizes respect, on the one hand, for the major stages of development and, on the other, the speed of individual development. Knowledge of the stages of development, encouraging a multidisciplinary approach to sport, and organizing competitions for

children along different lines to those for adolescents or adults, are among the measures to be taken if we wish to reduce errors due to an incorrect approach to the age factor.

7. The child’s right to compare himself with other children who have the same probabilities of success.

Too often, children come up against opponents who are significantly stronger or weaker than themselves. In sport, experiences of victory or defeat are very useful for building self-esteem and developing respect for others. Situations which create the feeling of helplessness that goes hand in hand with repeated experiences of defeat, or the feeling of power that comes with repeated experiences of winning, are clearly of little use from an educational point of view.

8. The right to take part in suitable competitions. The development of a competitive spirit in children starts from the age of three; this spirit is very

much present at the age of seven to eight when the child discovers affiliation, collaboration and cooperation; it is properly integrated and assimilated (i.e. distinguished from experiences of humiliation or of low self-esteem) at the age of 12-13. It is not a question of deciding whether we are for or against competition, but of seeing to it that competition is properly organized. For example, one-day competitions are much more suitable for young children than championships which take place over several months.

9. The right to safety when taking part in sport. Facilities, playing fields, or the length of matches must be adapted to the physical and psychological realities of the child. This increases the child’s sense of security and of being in control of the playing space.

10. The right to have time to rest. Too often, especially in the case of early intensive training, training camps



The joy of running for children.

are held during school holidays. Rest is important for all school children; for children who also do sport, it is indispensable. Moreover, children rarely admit to being tired and it is the duty of adults to ask them to rest.

11. The right not to be a champion.

But children also have the right to be champions. Thus, if he has the desire and the talent, the young sportsman can, from a certain age, usually after the age of 15-16, train more intensively, or, alternatively, continue to play the sport of his choice for fun and to spend time with others. In both cases, he will have good memories of the sport he played when he was a child.

Disseminating the Charter and applying and integrating its principles in the practice of children's sport is certainly feasible. Generally speaking, however, it is up to trainers, sports leaders and sports doctors and psychologists to implement the measures necessary to limit this second imbalance linked to excessive early practice of sport by children.

A third source of imbalance which threatens children and sport is parents' attitudes. During the years following the introduction of the Charter, we have often heard trainers complain about the attitudes of young athletes' parents, and, in particular, ask themselves how such a delicate situation can be improved.

In his book *Joy and sadness in children's sports*, 1978, the American psychologist Rainer Martens emphasizes that "Too often children's joy of sports is obliterated by adults who seek glory through victory. These adults have forgotten that the

prerequisites of the desirable long-term outcomes of children's sports are the immediate joy, fun and exhilaration of playing." Several studies have shown that parental pressure is high on the list of reasons why children leave sport. The stifling presence of mothers and fathers prevents children from considering sport as their own domain, where they can learn to master technical difficulties, manage interpersonal relations, and experience success and failure. As we underlined above, parents today play the role of initiators to sport. Nevertheless, as Martens highlights in the same book, "adults are solely to blame if joy and sadness become synonymous, in a child's mental process, with victory or defeat".

How can this imbalance be rectified? How can we convey the message that sport provides a great opportunity for personal development, for meeting adults other than parents and teachers, and for confrontations with peers? Simply to relativize the importance of the result is one way, especially at the ages we are dealing with here, and to give parents some simple advice on interacting with their sport-

ing child: for example, when the child returns from a competition, to ask him whether he enjoyed himself before asking him whether he won.

To conclude, we can draw a generally positive verdict of the state of children's sport. About 70% of sporting activities on offer for children are correctly based on having fun, meeting other people and progressing. If children abandon their sport in this context, they will feel free to take up another sport, which is a sign of the success of their initiation to sport. Unfortunately, however, 10% of sporting activities for children are unacceptable, exploit children and threaten their health. The remaining 20%, involving early intensive training, should be closely monitored.

A balance can be struck above all by handing the main role to the children themselves, and ensuring that they enjoy the right to be a child in sport, at ease with their development as human beings. We need only observe the activity in a school playground, where games are organized on an improvised playing field, to understand that children show genetic traces of the hunter instinct, which naturally leads them to physical activity. Sport is rapidly integrated as a genuine need which they identify both as a means of release and as a form of self-expression. By acting as a catalyst to self-discovery, sport gives a child the opportunity to know his limits but also to acquire tools which will allow him to surpass them. Playing sport is a source of learning, progress and pleasure; an additional way of enriching life.



A baby swimmer.

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