Young people’s socialisation into sport: Experiencing the specialising phase

Ann MacPhail¹ & David Kirk²

¹University of Limerick, Ireland, ²Loughborough University, UK

Address for correspondence;

Dr. Ann MacPhail
Department of Physical Education and Sport Sciences
University of Limerick
Ireland
E-mail: Ann.MacPhail@ul.ie
Phone: +353-61-234155

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Abstract

It can be argued that young people’s socialisation into sport follows a general pattern of sampling, specialising and investing (Côté and Hay, 2002a). This paper develops research where we previously examined the key features of the sampling phase in the junior section of Forest Athletic Club (FAC) (Author 1 et al., 2003). Continuing our involvement in an ethnography of FAC in England we are now able to report and discuss key characteristics of the specialising phase that were evident through young people’s involvement at the club. These include a reduction in the number of sporting activities being pursued, enjoyment and success, the notion of deliberate practice and the influence of family, school and club support on those moving into the specialising phase. We note that while some of the key features of the sampling phase carried over to the specialising phase there were subtle differences in how they were practised. We report characteristics of the specialising phase that were not evident when observing and interviewing the same athletes when they were experiencing the sampling phase. In concluding we suggest how the quality of the sporting experience in the specialising years can increase the likelihood that young people will remain involved in sport.
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Introduction

The creation of effective pathways to retain involvement in sport, and in particular to cater for potential high performance athletes and players, is a current issue within the sporting community in the UK (Sport England, 2004). Sport England explain that the main thrust of their work is to develop the skills and potential of young people and direct them along pathways that help them to realise their potential in sport (www.sportengland.org/index/about_sport_england.htm). They are aware that young people progress along a sporting pathway that will take them from the school environment to the club environment but question how best to assist young people. Sport England appreciates the role of sport clubs’ contributions towards the promotion of pathways and the wider sport development system. They have introduced a scheme called ‘Clubmark’ to acknowledge clubs who are committed to providing a safe, effective and child-friendly environment, that is, better-quality club provision for young people (Sport England, 2002a). Forging links between schools and local clubs is a central responsibility of School Sport Co-ordinators (SSC). SSCs are based in families of schools to provide a sustainable infrastructure for the development of physical education and sport in a local area. SSCs have a remit to coaching, after school activity and inter school competitions (DCMS, 2000).

At the Sport England / English Sports Council Summit in July 2000 a number of prominent people involved and concerned with sporting opportunities within the UK voiced their belief in the importance of appropriate pathways for all individuals involved in sporting activity. While the Summit noted that clubs form the backbone
of the sporting culture by catering for a wide range of individuals from beginner to
elite, attendees questioned how to begin to create a better infrastructure of clubs to
create athlete pathways. Dave Moorcroft, the Chief Executive of Uk Athletics,
suggested examining the potential development of clubs linking with the school
structure in order to create pathways for athletes. A nationwide research project
carried out by Uk Athletics in 1999 set out to seek views on the future plans for the
athlete pathway and the related issues of recruiting and inspiring young athletes,
developing athletic skills and commitment, nurturing and retaining athletes and
developing talented athletes (‘a question of athletics’: www.ukathletics.net/). David
Whitaker, a Performance Consultant, voiced concern that the pyramid structure of
English sport, i.e., foundation, participation and excellence, had preoccupied those
involved in the administration of UK sport. He believed it was now important to
move away from counting how many people were actively involved in sport to
addressing the appropriateness of pathways, ‘Numbers are not the answer, pathways
are’ (Sport England, 2002a, p.41).

‘Game Plan: a strategy for delivering Government’s sport and physical activity
objectives’ (Strategy Unit, 2002) prioritises young people as a specific group that
need additional assistance to increase their participation levels. The report
acknowledges that providing the best possible introduction to sport and physical
activity when young is vital if people are to be active throughout their lives. The
writers of the report believes that for young people the aim should be to develop
‘sports literacy’, that is the development of a range of skills with an emphasis on
quality and choice. The report discusses a Long Term Athlete Development (LTAD) model that aims to teach young people a generic set of basic sports skills. The LTAD model is classified as a ‘specialisation’ model with the intention that from the ‘FUNdamental’ stage athletes/participants will strive to move through a number of phases – ‘Learning to train’, ‘Training to train’ and ‘Training to compete’ – until they reach the final stage of ‘Training to win’.

In contrast to this linear, prescriptive model, Côté and Hay’s (2002a) propose a model of young people’s socialisation into sport. While such a model accommodates a progression from the ‘Sampling phase’ to the ‘Specialising years’ and then to the ‘Investment / Recreation phase’, it also acknowledges that at any stage of involvement young people can choose to move to take part on a recreational basis or drop out. While it is Côté and Hay’s (2002a) notion of young people’s socialisation into sport that provides the framework for this paper, we will revisit the LTAD model in our discussion to assess the extent to which the findings from this study support the two models.

Sport England has conducted three large-scale surveys of young people (and physical education teachers) in England in 1994, 1999 and 2002. In surveying over 3,000 young people’s (6 to 16 years of age) involvement in sport in 2002, Sport England reported that, in particular for those aged 11 years and over, the range of opportunities and levels of sporting involvement remain impressively high (Sport England, 2002b). They also reported a continuing and growing contribution of clubs
where young people can take part in sport, stating that 43% of all young people surveyed were members of a sport club (not organized by schools and excluding youth or social clubs) in 2002 (Sport England, 2003a). In comparing results from the first national survey of young people and sport in 1994 (Mason, 1995), there are signs that young people are now more inclined to participate in sport or exercise in their free time. Young people are spending, on average, over 8 hours a week taking part in sport (Sport England, 2003a). Young people are participating in a wider range of activities out-of-lesson than in 1994 and 1999. However, the amount of time spent on sports or exercise out-of-lessons was reported to decrease with age.

The results reported from Sport England are positive in the sense that a high number of young people are actively involved in sporting activity. In this paper we report and discuss the continued sporting pathway of individuals who we have previously identified at a stage where they chose to sample a range of activities without specialising in one or two specific sports (Author 1 et al., 2003). We believe that Côté and Hay’s (2002a) framework for young people’s socialisation into sport has the potential to contribute to the ongoing discussion of how best to create a club infrastructure that will create effective athlete pathways and particularly to address a key objective of Sport England to ‘retain more people in sport’ (Sport England, 2003b). We begin by introducing Côté and Hay’s notion of young people’s socialisation into sport.
Young people’s socialisation into sport: Experiencing the specialising phase

Young people’s socialisation into sport

According to Côté and Hay (2002a) young people’s socialisation into sport follows a general pattern: sampling, specialising and investing. The key features of the ‘sampling’ phase are that children participate in a range of sports, that their key motivation is fun and enjoyment, and that the emphasis is on structured or deliberate play rather than training or deliberate practice. Côté and Hay define deliberate play as activities designed to provide enjoyment through active and pleasurable participation. Deliberate practice involves activities specifically designed to improve the current level of performance and are not inherently enjoyable. Young people’s early socialisation into sport in the sampling phase has been documented elsewhere (Author 1 et al., 2003).

From the sampling phase, young people may either drop out of a sport, move into the ‘recreation years’ or move into the ‘specialising’ phase. The recreation years are where young people participate regularly in sports without aspiring to reach an elite level of performance. The specialising phase involves more deliberate practice (sport specific skill development specifically designed to improve current level of performance) and a reduction in the range of sport activities while still retaining fun and excitement as central elements of the sporting experience. Individuals involved at the specialising phase begin to experience deliberate practice where they are encouraged to focus on improving performance through the most relevant and effective activity.
Other characteristics of the specialising phase include choosing to specialise in middle childhood, i.e., approximately 13 years of age, and encouragement to work harder and more seriously than at the sampling phase. A balance of deliberate play and deliberate practice is also evident. Côté and Hay found that critical incidents that made a child pursue one activity over others included experiences with a coach, success and/or enjoyment of the activity.

From the specialising phase, Côté and Hay suggest a young person has three options. The first is to drop out of a sport, the second is to enter what they call the recreational phase where sport is played relatively informally and for fun, and the third is the ‘investment’ phase. Entry into the investment phase usually signals a focus on one activity and a commitment to intensive training and competitive success. Côté and Hay’s three phases of sport participation are outlined in Figure 1.

We reported and discussed in a previous paper characteristics of the sampling phase that were evident through young people’s involvement in FAC (Author 1 et al., 2003). These included involvement in a range of sports and other activities, experiencing enjoyment and fun, competition, fitness and health benefits, deliberate play and friendships and peer relations. This paper draws on data from our involvement in an ethnography of Forest Athletics Club over a two and a half-year period. We will report and discuss the key characteristics of the specialising phase.
that were evident through young people’s involvement at the club and examine the extent to which characteristics from the sampling phase were developed, if at all, in moving on to the specialising phase. We begin by providing an account of the design of the study.

**Research Design**

This paper is concerned with reporting and discussing the results from a single-site ethnographic study that was conducted over a period of twenty-one months.

**Ethnography**

The primary purpose of ethnography is to capture the routine and everyday activities of the people who occupy a particular site and to understand the meaning of these activities from the participants’ point of view (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1984). Ethnography seeks to understand social life beyond surface appearances and to produce ‘thick description’ of social practices (Geertz, 1973). As a research strategy, ethnography is ideally suited to investigating dynamic and complex activities such as youth sport participation. This is because, in addition to generating thick description, ethnography requires regular in-depth contact with a research site and with the people in it over a prolonged period of time. Prolonged immersion in a research site assists the researcher to begin to recognise routine and repeating practices, cyclical and seasonal processes, and the complex patterning of social practice.
Forest Athletics Club

Forest Athletics Club (FAC, a pseudonym) is located in a large, relatively prosperous town in the Midlands of England. It is difficult to report an accurate number of people who access the club. The club not only has paid-up members participating but also those who choose not to pay a membership fee in favour of paying an entry charge every time they wish to attend FAC training evenings. The club caters for the entire range of track and field events and for cross country and road racing specialists.

Two Introductory Groups at FAC, both taking place on a Monday and Wednesday evening, catered for children between the ages of 9 and 15. There was no formal membership of either Introductory Group and young people could attend both evenings if they wished. The Introductory Groups catered for those young people who had begun their socialisation into sport by sampling a range of sports and other activities that were available to them. Ways in which the Introductory Groups at FAC encouraged socialisation into sport for young people have previously been reported and discussed (Author 1 et al., 2003). The young athletes tended to move on from the Introductory Groups and attend more specific training groups at FAC. This occurred when prompted either by coaches or parents to specialise in a specific athletic event or once they themselves chose to reduce the number of other activities they were involved in to focus more on athletics. There were specialised training groups for all athletic disciplines, including middle distance, sprinting, long jump, hurdling and the throws. The move to specific training groups was, in many cases, the start of the specialising phase of young people’s development in youth sport, with young athletes
becoming more committed to their involvement in athletics and a specific athletic event, along with a reduction in other club and leisure activities.

It was common for those who attended FAC twice a week to maintain membership of two training groups before fully committing to specialising. The majority of young athletes chose to attend the Introductory Group one evening a week and participate in a more specialised group on a second evening. The make up of the more specialised groups tended to be young athletes who had fed through the Introductory Groups at FAC. In some instances, athletes who wanted to specialise had arrived at FAC through their previous involvement in athletics at school or in another club;

Fieldnotes, Mon. 19 Feb., 2001: I have noticed Garry before but only at the shot putt area and not as someone who has moved up from the sampling groups [Introductory Groups]. He told me (...) that his mum had phoned the club to inquire if they did throwing after he had won a throwing competition at school.

Similar to those in the sampling phase (Author 1 et al., 2003), young people’s choice of attendance on a particular evening depended on when they had a free night from other leisure activities or an evening where it was suitable for their parents or guardian to transport them to FAC. For those who were more established in their training group they tended to maintain attendance on that particular night in order to meet up with friends. Some of the specialised groups appeared to attract more girls
than boys (e.g., hurdles and sprints) while others attracted more boys than girls (e.g.,
throwing events and high jump). Two middle distance groups catered for boys and
girls separately.

Field observations and field notes

Continuing and building on the observations and field notes reported previously
(Author 1 et al., 2003), the first author of this paper (Author 1) began to carry out
observations of specialised group training and the individuals within them and
interviewed young athletes, parents and coaches. Field notes containing the results of
observations were kept by (Author 1) and were written when she was not in situ.
Although not a member of FAC, she did train with the club once a week and carried
out observations on another evening. By this point in the study, those athletes, parents
and coaches she was observing and talking to in relation to specialising groups were
familiar with (Author 1’s) presence at the club, attending training sessions and
weekend competitions. (Author 1’s) participation in the club and her involvement
with the younger athletes is detailed in Author 2 and Author 1 (2003).

This paper is based mainly on interview data generated during the latter phase of
contact with the club. Young people, coaches and parents were interviewed once. All
the names of those interviewed have been changed.

Interviews
(Author 1) carried out small group interviews with 14 children between the ages of 13 and 16 years, 8 of who were girls. These small group interviews were conducted at the side of the FAC track at the completion of training sessions in June 2001. The majority of the 14 young people had previously been involved in observations and interviews that informed our previous discussion related to the sampling phase. Young athletes were asked how often they attended the club, how they had been introduced to the specific group they were a member of, how committed they were to athletics, other activities they pursued outside of FAC and who or what influenced their continued participation.

Interviews with 3 coaches of different event groups and with the parents / guardians of 5 young athletes were conducted between June and August 2001. The coach interviews were done at the end of training sessions while the parent interviews were conducted either during training sessions or at organised competitive meetings. The three coaches interviewed were all male. One was a shot putt coach and the other two were middle distance coaches, with one catering for boys and the other for girls. Coaches were asked about their interest in and approach to coaching, the development of the athletes in their care and the expectations they have of athletes. Parents and guardians included a grandfather, one mother and three fathers who regularly stayed at the club while the children in their care were training. Parents were asked questions about their own child’s involvement in the club and other interests they pursue, what they believed the attraction of such involvement was and their envisaged role as a parent whose child was committed to a specific sport(s).
On reflecting the potential impact that (Author 1) as an athlete and researcher had on the comments made by the young athletes, coaches and parents, it was felt that each group did not appear guarded about the information they revealed, with some seeing (Author 1)’s role as someone to act as ‘an open channel of communication’ (Author 1, 2004).

From the field notes and interviews we identified text segments, attached category labels to the segments and sorted all text segments that related to a specific category or theme. Similar to the constant comparative method of analysing the data (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Glaser and Strauss, 1967), the data was manually reviewed repeatedly and continually coded, looking for similarities and differences, groupings, patterns and items of particular significance (Mason, 1996).

**Characteristics of the specialisation phase**

Building on the key features of the specialising phase mentioned previously, we move on to report and discuss characteristics of the specialising phase that were evident through young people’s involvement at FAC. These included a reduction in the number of sporting activities being pursued, enjoyment and success, the notion of deliberate practice and the influence of family, school and club support.

(1) Reduction in the number of sport and leisure activities
Although the majority of the young athletes experiencing the specialising phase had reduced the number of activities they took part in during the week, those at the younger end of the spectrum, i.e., 13 and under, were still coping with attending a number of clubs. Katherine, aged 13, explained that she attended a tennis and hockey club while Susan, also aged 13, was committed to a tennis club and explained how participating as part of a tennis county squad entailed private coaching and numerous matches. Craig and Pete both aged 12, attended football and tennis clubs. Three older girls, all aged 15, attended FAC twice a week and each had one other activity they pursued at other clubs. These were horse riding, football and dance. Kelly was the only one whose other main sporting activity, dance, threatened her continuation in athletics, explaining that she was considering a career that involved dance. Alan, aged 15, took part in club basketball and judo and Gordon, also aged 15, admitted ‘I’ve stopped playing football so I have more time for athletics and golf’. The following extract illustrates the complexity of reasons, including competition opportunities and family support, that may result in young people’s decision to pursue a particular sport in favour of another;

Fieldnotes, Mon. 26 March, 2001: (…) Laura was thinking of turning to swimming. Karen [coach of the Introductory Group] believed she was feeling a bit unhappy with athletics because she hadn’t been chosen for the regional Sports Hall event and that she was doing well at swimming for the school (…) She hinted that Laura was from a single-parent family by implying that her
mum could not afford the time to take Laura to swimming and continue to take her younger brother, John, to FAC.

(2) Enjoyment, success and competition

Young athlete’s training experiences appeared to be enhanced by their enjoyment of a particular athletic event and being involved with peers. Susan and Katherine, both aged 13 years, supported the importance of being involved with peers and with each other;

Susan: I prefer training in athletics. Often in training at tennis I have to do the same thing because I am the only one who turns up.

Katherine: I like training in athletics because Susan is here.

Susan and Katherine were inseparable and this had been evident before from previous observations of their involvement in the Introductory Group at FAC. In noting more recent observations, it was clear that being together was a significant attraction to their continued involvement at FAC;

Fieldnotes, Mon. 22 Jan, 2001: Their behaviour, not disruptive to the group as a whole, has not improved. They continue to scream, mock laugh and ‘dance’ around the track in between reps.
The club itself was attributed as fostering enjoyment in young athletes. The parents of Rosie, aged 16, believed that her enjoyment in athletics came from her involvement in the club, ‘She is always ready with her bag to come training. She loves the whole set up’. Kelly’s mother believed that it was due to FAC being a friendly and social club that Kelly, aged 15, enjoyed athletics and competing.

A popular reason for young people choosing to specialise in an athletic event at the expense of other sports was their perceived level of ability and consequently the level of effort required;

Susan: I used to be in a swimming club but I gave that up because it was too hard (...) I was never going to be very good at gymnastics and I didn’t like swimming so I gave up both.

Fieldnotes, Mon. 15 Jan., 2001: I asked a couple of the boys why they chose the sprint group and they admitted it was because they were better at sprinting than longer distances.

Craig, aged 12, admitted that his reason for choosing to specialise in middle distance rather than sprinting was that he was ‘not very good at sprinting’ and that from the other sports he is currently involved in he expects to remain involved in athletics because ‘I am better at it’.
However, Rosie’s father reported that although she had been good at cross-country at school she didn’t enjoy it and consequently favoured sprinting over middle distance events.

Young athletes measured their commitment to athletics by their increased participation in formal competitions representing FAC. Kim, aged 10 and one of the youngest to be involved in the specialising phase, and Craig, aged 12, leave us in no doubt how committed they are to their current involvement in athletics;

Kim: It’s a big thing in my life, more than anything else I do because I enjoy it and I’m interested in it.

Craig: I think I am pretty committed. Most of the running events they ask me to do I do unless I have got something else on. I usually always come down on Mondays and Wednesdays unless I am ill or something (…) throughout the years I have got more committed.

Gordon, aged 15, was attending FAC up to three times a week, which included a javelin session on a Sunday. Gordon’s commitment also extended to competing for the club;

If I have got a race I will put that on the calendar and make sure I do that instead of anything else.
Alan, aged 15, reiterated Gordon’s point by admitting that ‘if there is a competition it will come first’. However, Rosie’s father warned of what can happen when a young athlete chooses to compete with older athletes;

There was only one period for a while where she dropped out for a short while when she stepped up to under-fifteen competition and she was still only twelve. She was so little that demoralised her a bit and we stopped coming for half a season. Then she got back into it at school and her confidence grew so we came back down.

(3) Deliberate practice

As explained previously, a move into the specialising phase results in a change of emphasis from deliberate play to deliberate practice. Young athletes were aware of the benefit to acquire sport specific skill development and in relation to FAC this entailed acquiring skill development in a particular athletic event. Katherine was aware that in order for her to focus particularly on distance events it was necessary for her to now train with a middle distance group. She explained how the Introductory Group at FAC had entailed ‘doing lots of drills and short things’ and that the more specialised group entailed ‘running around the track’ and ‘the coach timing you’. Although the structure of the content was different between the sampling and specialising phase, Susan believed that either experience was as demanding as the
other and implied that not being proficient in a particular athletic discipline may make it harder;

- Mondays [middle distance group] are hard because you are running a long distance so you run out of energy. Wednesdays [Introductory Group] are hard because you are sprinting and we’re not good at sprinting.

Craig, aged 12, was clear of the advantages to developing his middle distance running by specialising his training;

- (...) when I just started athletics I just came down for fun. Exercise and training for my football, fitness really. Then when I got into running, wanting to do it, I decided I wanted to take a step up and go to a better group. Well, it is not a better group but I mean a group of my ability and what I want to do there is like 400s. In the other group all we used to do was games etc. and I wanted to do proper running exercise and training.

A number of young athletes were aware of the change in philosophy between that of deliberate play (sampling years) and deliberate practice (specialising years). Claire, aged 15, explained that in the specialising years anything that you choose not to complete in training is detrimental to your progress whereas during the sampling years this was not something that would bother you. Gordon and Alan reported that the training in a specialised group was harder, ‘more concentrated’, ‘more
disciplined’ and ‘more intense’ and that you were made to train more in the time you spent at the club.

Coaches were also aware of the change in philosophy between the sampling years and specialising years. Mark, a coach who had previously been in charge of the Introductory Group and was now focused on coaching middle distance explained his expectations from those athletes who were now in the specialising phase;

I would certainly expect more from the group I have got now in commitment and the amount of effort they put in. I wouldn’t expect any messing about. I would expect them to come along and take it seriously, which they do.

This expectation had resulted in the lead author noticing a dramatic change in the behaviour of one particular boy between his participation during the sampling years and the specialising years;

Fieldnote, Mon. 26 March, 2001: (…) I am always surprised how some of the boys’ attitudes, i.e., Craig, have changed since I first watched them as members of the Introductory Group from someone who was hard to control to someone who is now prepared to undertake the session explained by Mark. Mark explained the change in behaviour may be due to the competition that the boys experience amongst themselves and that they are aware that there are only a number of places available on leagues for them to take part in their
preferred event. Even when the boys are clearly tired and Mark tells them they have one or two more [repetitions] to go, they drag themselves to the start line and continue with the session which is impressive in relation to their previous behaviour.

(4) Support at the specialising phase

Family

Parents of young athletes differed in their practice of supportive parent. Joanne, aged 14, repeatedly made comments regarding her father’s pressure in her attending a club to improve her performance;

He made me come to the club because since I left primary school he said I’ve been doing well in my running so I should join a training group.

Joanne reported that her father had informed her that if she did not attend FAC she would not be allowed to go horse riding and he emphasised to her that if she did not start training soon she would not complete very well at cross country throughout the winter months. Her father admitted that he was frustrated at Joanne’s disregard for the obvious talent that she possesses, explaining that if he did not prompt her she would not do any training. His commitment as a supporter of Joanne’s running was obvious when asked what he saw his role as a parent of an athlete involved;
Make sure she does come [to the club]. Try and encourage her to do what she can to be part of it. There have been some weekends where going to these cross countries have been a complete nightmare for the distance we have to travel, etc. but we are more than happy to do it as long as she puts the commitment in when she gets there.

Eileen, aged 12, was another individual who did not appear excited about her involvement in athletics and appeared to be following in the steps of her mother;

Fieldnote, Mon. 29 Jan, 2001: (…) Eileen does not appear interested in taking part, always being the last to stand on the track, asking if she has to do the next one [rep] and a body language that implies she is not very comfortable. She was the same last week. This evening I noticed her mother (…) had escorted her through the pavilion and down to the track. When her mother reappeared towards the end of the evening I noticed that she was spotted by an older runner whose greeting to her implied that she used to train at the club (…) She was saying how delighted she was that her daughter was now involved in running. I get the impression however, that the daughter’s involvement is prompted more by the mother than her own interest.

A different approach to encouragement was Katherine’s father who would prompt her to go to the club if she was in a bad mood and did not want to run. Jenny’s parents admitted to supporting her whatever she decided to do explaining that ‘We
encouraged her in the early days and she has found she has a talent. We have supported it ever since’.

Keith, aged 16, explained how he had been involved in FAC since the age of 8 due to his father being a coach at the club. He used to watch his dad coaching and then would run a couple of laps with him at the end of the session. Keith had recently completed a Level 1 coaching course along with his father and hoped to help out with his training group in the summer. The relationship between the involvement of a parent in athletics and the influence that has on their children participating in the sport was not only one way. Dave, a father of two young athletes who were increasingly committing more time to FAC, had decided to train with the shot putt group while his son and daughter undertook their respective training sessions at FAC in the evenings.

Kim’s grandfather brought her down to the club and stayed to watch while she trained. He stated that he had asked Kim if she wanted to attend a club after she had won a school cross-country race. He also admitted to training her and her younger sister once a week. His commitment to Kim’s attendance is evident when he states that ‘It would need to be something major for me not to bring Kim down [to the club]’.
Coaches and parents reported the influence that school had on encouraging young people to specialise in athletics. Rosie’s and Kelly’s parents were encouraged by their respective schoolteachers to introduce the girls to a club when it was clear how talented they were in sport at school. Kelly’s parents admitted that ‘the right teacher at the right time’ is probably one of the key things in young people being encouraged to foster their sporting abilities further. However, they were critical of no formal links between the club and the schools.

Club and coach

Being too old to be involved in the Introductory Groups appeared to be a popular reason given by FAC Committee members for young people to begin to specialise and was not necessarily related to the ability of individuals. As one coach of a middle distance group explained;

Andrew: We’ve got Eileen. She is not a particularly good runner and sometimes we give her the times and you see her face drop. But we say it doesn’t matter as long as she completes what I give her to do. She can take all day if she wants.

The club’s female cross country secretary and the coaches involved in running the Introductory Groups were reported to have influenced some of the young people’s move from the Introductory Groups to the more specialised training groups. One of the coaches of the Introductory Group observed Gordon throwing a tennis ball one
evening and encouraged him to try the javelin. However, one middle distance coach at FAC voiced concern that it was the current coaches of athletes that decided when athletes should begin to enter the specialising phase, and not coaches dealing with those in the specialising phase. Mark reported that he had previously identified a couple of athletes who he would like to have seen specialise long before the coach of the athletes decided it was time for them to move on. Another example of a coach being proactive in identifying athletes with attributes suited to a particular event was the shot putt coach at FAC who reported approaching athletes at school events or at open meetings in an attempt to convince them that they had the potential to be good throwers.

Attempts were made by FAC to encourage and accommodate young athletes who were keen to train for a specific athletic event. Andrew explained that the group that he lead had been set up the previous year to accommodate the younger female athletes who competed in cross-country and wanted to keep fit throughout the winter. The coaches at FAC conveyed an understanding and appreciation of what dealing with young people at different levels of their socialisation into sport entailed.

Mark, one of the middle distance coaches, was aware of the pressures of other sports on individuals’ lives and performance and had consequently given a log sheet to each of his young male athletes for them to record not only their training at FAC but also other sporting activities. This allowed Mark to adjust training evenings for those who
had already played sport after school or who had competed in a match or game the previous day.

The role of the coach in keeping young athletes interested in athletics was evident at FAC. There was also an appreciation from coaches that the training sessions they set had to be pitched at a suitable level and complement any competition the group had participated in the previous weekend or were planning to take part in during the week;

Fieldnotes, Mon. 29 Jan., 2001: The session was 6x200m and Mark commented that they were not doing too much tonight because a lot of them had competed in schools’ cross-country at the weekend.

Fieldnotes, Mon. 2 April, 2001: The younger boys were doing a pyramid of distances and Mark pointed out that they were doing a relatively easier session due to the open graded meeting they were expected to do on the Wednesday evening.

The coaches at FAC also conveyed awareness of a difference between catering for young people in a specialisation phase and in an investment phase. The former still allowed for some level of flexibility in young people’s commitment and did not require the extreme intensity of the athlete’s commitment to the sport expected in the investment years. As Andrew, one of the middle distance coaches, explained;
(...) they are at the stage where they don’t want to be over trained because their bones are still growing. I’m quite happy for them to do one session a week. When they get to fifteen take it up to two sessions. Under fifteen I don’t see the point of pushing them too hard. You will push them out of the sport if you do.

Andrew also admitted that he accepted that he could take the young people only so far in their development and when it came to the point where he could offer athletes no more he would encourage them to move on to another coach that could develop them further.

**Discussion**

Our intention is to discuss the key characteristics of the specialising phase that were evident through young athlete’s involvement at FAC and, where relevant, highlight links to the LTAD model. We will also examine the extent to which characteristics from the sampling phase at the club (*Author 1* et al., 2003) were developed, if at all, in moving on to the specialising phase.

The young athletes at FAC who had clearly made the move from the sampling phase to the specialising phase reduced the number of sport and leisure activities that they now pursued. In relation to the LTAD model it could be argued that athletes were moving from the learning to train phase to training to train. While in the sampling
phase, the young people had tended to ‘try out’ a range of different sporting and leisure opportunities, with priorities continually shifting between all opportunities affording only one evening a week to attendance at FAC. With a reduction in activities, young athletes were able to prioritise attendance at FAC to twice, and sometimes three times, a week along with weekend competition. In most cases, the young athletes maintained involvement in one or two other activities external to FAC. Coaches were aware of this and catered for their athletes respectively by designing training sessions that would complement athletes’ level of involvement in other sporting activities. The reduction of involvement in other activities resulted in the majority of the young athletes commenting on their availability and commitment to compete for FAC. It is interesting to note in this context that, within the prescriptions of the LTAD model, as athletes move from the learning to train phase to that of training to train, the training-to-competition ratio is recommended to change from 70:30 to 60:40.

Enjoyment was still determined by being with friends although there appeared to be a move away from a heavy reliance on the attendance of friends and intrinsic motivation, more so for boys than girls. At the specialising phase enjoyment was also related to the success and ability with which athletes were performing. This was noticeably different from the same athletes’ involvement in the sampling phase where the social element and ‘playing’ were the greatest experiences of enjoyment. Young people’s perception of what makes their participation fun and enjoyable is expected to change as they experience different levels of involvement (Wankel and Kriesel,
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1985). Sport England reported that sport and exercise were regarded as social activities by over half of all 3,000 young people that they surveyed (Sport England, 2002b). Côté and Hay (2002a, p. 498) admitted that ‘While fun remains a central element of the specialising years (ages 13-16), sport specific skill development through practice should be a priority of most sport programs’. The evidence of sport specific skill was one of the strongest observations we made in relation to the Specialisers at FAC. The development of sport specific skills is an objective of the training to train phase of the LTAD model.

There was an awareness and acknowledgment from athletes and coaches regarding the change of philosophy and emphasis of training during the specialising years. When the athletes had been experiencing the sampling phase we discovered that there was a lack of focus on competition, outcomes from the training and out-performing others in preference for mastery and self-improvement. Now that they were in the specialising phase competition was a significant attraction to their involvement in athletics and consequently athletes were appreciative of why they were undertaking training that was specific to their chosen athletic discipline. As Samplers they did not necessarily identify their involvement in deliberate play activities and practices with any particular purpose. Their participation was sufficient reason to attend FAC. The introduction of competition and being asked to perform in the specialising phase resulted in athletes being more focussed on their training, and its purposes, than previously. This is in line with the objective of the training to train stage of the LTAD model. As Samplers, young people reported that a main reason for attending FAC
was to maintain a level of health and fitness that would allow them to be active in any other sports. Athletes were now valuing the specific advantages of their training at FAC to their potential performance in athletics and we reported that in some cases this emphasis on the more structured deliberate practice was more rewarding for individuals than their experience of deliberate play.

While the family is acknowledged as an important socialising agent in the sampling years, it appeared that it continued to be so in the specialising years. Hellstedt (1987) conceptualised parents’ involvement in their children’s participation in sport on a continuum from under-involved, to moderate, to over-involved. It was clear that a number of young athletes in the specialising phase were experiencing a shift in their parents’ involvement from being relatively uninvolved to taking it upon themselves to apply pressure to their sibling’s attendance at training. This occurrence was more widely reported at this stage in the study than when we observed the young athletes as Samplers. In their previous experiences of FAC parents tended to be happy and resigned to the fact that athletics was just one of many opportunities that their son or daughter chose to pursue. However, once their child(ren) had decided to drop other leisure activities in favour of attending one or two clubs the parents may have felt it was their role to enforce such a decision by being more forceful in their encouragement to maintain attendance at the clubs. Unsurprisingly, the level of investment that a parent felt in their child’s specialising years increased from that of supporting them when they were ‘having a go’ at a number of activities. However, Côté and Hay (2002b) warn that the level and intensity of parental expectations can
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affect their child’s participation and continued involvement in particular activities. The situation reported at FAC contradicts the finding from Sport England that the influence of family members appears to decline as young people get older. It was reported that 55% of younger children strongly agreed that they received encouragement from their family to participate in sport and this fell to 35% among those aged 11 to 15 years (Sport England, 2002a).

Those young athletes who had not entered the specialising phase from previous involvement in athletics at FAC had arrived through their involvement in school sport. However, there appeared to be no formal link between FAC and local schools in promoting the opportunities available to young athletes. The lack of school-club links in the UK continues to be a major concern to those involved in the promotion of sporting opportunities to school-aged children. As we stated in the introduction, there is support for examining the potential development of clubs linking with the school structure in order to create pathways for athletes (Sport England, 2002a).

The coaches at FAC conveyed an understanding and appreciation of what dealing with young people at different levels of their socialisation into sport entailed. They admitted how their level of expertise and experience would, or would not, result in them being comfortable in dealing with athletes of differing levels of involvement and commitment. They were also aware and prepared to accommodate young athletes who, in choosing to experience the specialising phase of their socialisation into sport, were clearly not capable of reaching the same level of performance as others who had
made the same decision. Coaches at FAC were consequently helping to develop each individual’s self-esteem and enjoyment for athletics by providing appropriate feedback, encouragement and instruction (Côté, 2002).

One area that coaches conveyed could be better organised within FAC was the identification of athletes who should be encouraged to move from a sampling base to a specialising base and we would presume, from a specialising base to investment. Currently, there was no formal procedure and this resulted in athletes at FAC being encouraged to ‘move on’ either because their friends had or because coaches felt the athletes were too old to be involved in that particular phase of their socialisation into sport. In some instances individuals had been identified as having potential in a specific sporting area, athletics or other, and had been encouraged to attend another training group at FAC or another club. One concern with the lack of procedure in following athletes through their involvement in FAC would be that of dropout from the sport. Sport England provide evidence to suggest that any sport publicity campaign designed to increase involvement, or retention in sport, should be aimed at girls and those aged 11 to 16 years as they are the group least likely to participate in sport of their own choosing (Sport England, 2001). While the level of sports club participation among boys steadily increases with age, among girls the proportion falls during the ages of 14 and 15 years.

Important implications for the organisation of junior sport, in an attempt to increase the likelihood that young people will remain involved in sport, arise through our
examination of the features of the specialising phase. Firstly, there needs to be an awareness and acceptance from those involved in training young people that individuals are still likely to be involved in other sport and leisure activities. This can impact the level of training and performance that young people can safely undertake and may result in less emphasis on competition than recommended for the training to train phase of the LTAD model. Secondly, enjoyment is increased if young people are encouraged to experience success. Success for one individual may be different to that of another and it is important that junior sport caters for these different needs and aspirations. Thirdly, the notion of competition and competing against others appears to be the reason for young people becoming more committed to a sport and consequently undertaking the training. It is imperative that competition remains a healthy element of junior sport and that it does not dictate the young athlete’s experience of sport at the specialising phase. Finally, the support systems of coaches, schools and parents are still as valuable through the specialising years as they were during the sampling years. It may however be necessary to educate parents in the expected changes and opportunities that are likely to arise from young people beginning their socialisation into sport and moving through to specialising and possibly investing in sport.

Ireland is currently the only country to address formally the inter-relationship between the LTAD model and Côté and Hay’s (2002a) socialisation model. Developing the consultation document ‘Building pathways in Irish sport’ (NCTC, 2003), the Technical Advisory Group of the National Coaching and Training Centre
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(NCTC) have proposed a hybrid model that not only maps out player/athlete development but also recreational pathways. In a document entitled ‘Lifelong involvement in sport and physical activity’ (NCTC, 2004), the Group revise the 2003 consultation document and suggest that the learning to train phase of the LTAD model changes to a learning to play and practice phase, informed by Côté and Hay’s (2002a) framework. This leads the Group to suggest, in addition to the LTAD pathway, a long-term recreational pathway (LTRP) that includes the four phases of ‘FUNdamental’, ‘Learning to play and practice’, ‘Prepare to participate’ and ‘Recreation’. Such developments suggest that some mixture of prescription, illustrated by the Long Term Athlete Development model (Strategy Unit, 2002) and the more ecologically informed approach grounded in the reality of young people’s sport socialisation experiences, illustrated by Côté and Hay’s (2002a) model, may provide generative examples for future research, policy and practice.

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Figure 1: Côté and Hay’s three phases of sport participation.

Ref.: Côté and Hay (2002a, p.488).