

Myths surrounding the role of youth sports in developing Olympic champions

FUN and Games?

Daniel Gould and **Sarah Carson** argue that the professionalisation and specialisation of youth sports disadvantages the majority of young people who will never be elite athletes, and does not optimise the development of Olympic champions. They suggest that a multisport approach, which makes sport fun for all young people, will not only encourage youth to be physically active but also provides more young people with the support and skills necessary to progress to the elite sporting level.

Over the past several decades, youth sports have become increasingly professionalised. Winning, achieving elite or professional sport careers, and personal recognition and status have taken on increased importance, and early sport specialisation, intense involvement, and year-round training have begun to characterise many youth sports programs. Interestingly, while driven by the motive to achieve athletic excellence, the increasingly professionalised approach to youth sports is seldom founded on youth talent

development research. In fact, researchers have indicated that youth sport practice is often driven by a sort of folk pedagogy as opposed to hard scientific evidence (Ingham, Chase & Butt 2002).

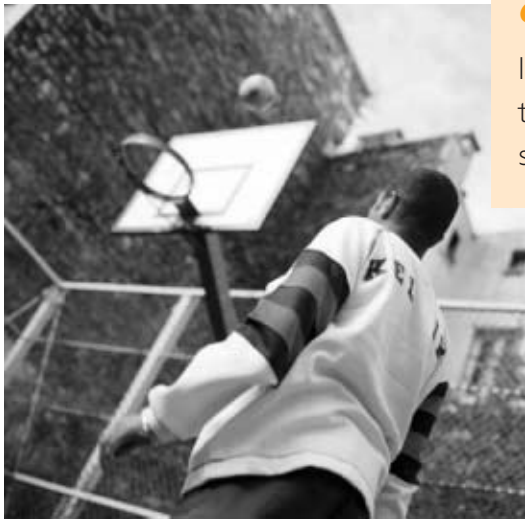
When scientific evidence is examined, athletic talent development research shows that many of these “professionalised” practices

may not be optimal approaches for fostering athletic talent development, which is also the case with general youth development. This paper is designed to summarise the research on developing athletic talent and, in so doing, identify and refute myths surrounding the role of youth sports in developing champions.*

* While the focus of this paper is on what the research says about the development of talent in young athletes, we note that a substantial body of evidence exists (see Smoll & Smith 2002a) to show how participation in sports positively facilitates the physical, psychological, social and emotional development of all children.

The development of athletic talent

Research shows that athletic talent development is a long-term process that takes approximately 10 years, or 10,000 hours, of quality practice to achieve (Ericsson 1996). A gifted athlete is not made overnight but develops over a considerable length of time. Ericsson, Krampe and Tesch-Romer (1993) also found that the development of expert performance in any endeavour (for example, music, sports, computer programming) is dependent on acquiring knowledge, skills and characteristics through



deliberate practice over an extended period of time (approximately 10 years). Moreover, these researchers emphasise that deliberate practice is not inherently motivating and does not necessarily lead to immediate rewards.

Champions have also been found to progress through definitive stages of development (Bloom 1985). In his classic research of 120 individuals (renowned artists, academicians, musicians, mathematicians, swimmers and tennis players) at the top of their fields, Bloom found that these talented individuals' careers fell into

three distinct stages: the early years, or what has been labelled the Romance Phase; the middle years, labelled the Precision Phase; and the later years, or the Integration Phase.

In the Romance Phase, the child developed a love for the activity, received encouragement from significant others, was free to explore the activity, had a great deal of fun, and was successful. Parents, during this stage, also fostered the value of hard work and doing things well.

In the Precision Phase, a master teacher or coach promoted long-term

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systematic skill learning in the talented individual. The focus was on skill development and technical mastery.

During the Integration Phase, the person continued to work with a master coach, and practiced many hours a day to attain optimal performance through training and the development of technical skills.

Other activities were sacrificed for the sake of the main activity, and there was a realisation that the activity was significant in one's life.

These phases occurred over a 15- to 20-year time-period, and each person moved through each phase in a progressive sequence, without skipping phases.

Across all domains, investments of tangible and intangible resources were found to be essential in nurturing promising individuals. In addition to financial support and transportation to numerous competitions and performances, parents found ways to

provide emotional support – facilitating disciplined involvement, while avoiding excessive expectations and pressure. The parents also served as models for disciplined independence and expected this in their talented children. Bloom's results, then, clearly show that talent development is a long-term process involving not only the talented person, but also a strong support system.

Csikszentmihalyi et al. (1993) also chronicled the development of outstanding achievers. Over 200 students with talent in art, athletics, mathematics, music or science were tracked throughout high school to determine how they differed from their peers whose talents were more ordinary. This study was also designed to determine why some students developed their talent and others failed to do so. Based on their findings, it was concluded that

talent must be viewed as a developmental process and cannot be attained unless it is valued by society and recognised and nurtured by parents, teachers and coaches. Motivation is a critical component and is greatly influenced by support and encouragement from those in the field and one's family members. Finally, discipline must be developed to allow the talented teen to study their domain long enough to acquire the skills needed for superior performance.

Csikszentmihalyi and colleagues (1993) also found that talent development involved the development of a mature personality during the teenage years. That is, these individuals needed a personality that allowed them to cope with the opportunities and obstacles that they faced in their chosen endeavors. Thus, to nurture his or her gift, the talented teen must have discipline, as well as talent. These talented teens were also found to spend more time practicing the

activity, less time working outside of school, less time socialising with friends, more time on hobbies, and less time doing chores than their less talented counterparts. The investigators also concluded that: 1) teens cannot develop talent unless they enjoy the activities of their domain, are intrinsically motivated and are willing to work hard to achieve their goals; 2) conflicts inherent in the development of talent (for example, making difficult choices and coming to terms with the implications of one's individuality) cannot be avoided; 3) and no teen succeeds unless he or she is supported by caring adults; and 4) talent development came easier to teenagers who have learned habits conducive to talent development.

Finally, in a sport-specific investigation, Gould, Dieffenbach and Moffett (2002) studied the talent development of 10 US Olympic champions, especially the development of their psychological skills. Each of the 10 champions was interviewed, as was one of their coaches (n = 10), and a parent, guardian, or significant other (n = 10). The athletes also completed a battery of psychological inventories.

The study concluded that these champions were characterised by: the ability to cope with and control anxiety; confidence; mental toughness/resiliency; sport intelligence; the ability to focus and block out distractions; competitiveness; a hard-work ethic; the ability to set and achieve goals; and coachability. Hence, they seemed to have developed mental skills that would prepare them for the long and difficult process necessary for developing their talent.

Not surprisingly, parents and families were perceived to play a critical role in the talent development process. Specifically, parents were very committed to their child and did such

things as modelled an active lifestyle, exposed their child to different sports, transported their child, paid for lessons and equipment, attended games and practices, and provided considerable encouragement and unconditional support. While families clearly supported and encouraged participation, in most cases they exerted little pressure to win. Families also emphasised an optimistic belief in the young athletes' ability to succeed or a "can do" attitude.

Families also modelled hard work and discipline, a finding consistent with research by Bloom (1985), who showed that parents of highly successful individuals espoused or modelled values related to achievement such as hard work, success, being active and persistence. At the same time, parents emphasised the notion, "if you are going to do it, do it right". They also held high yet realistic expectations and standards for their children, and "stick to it" and "follow-through on commitments" attitudes.

Finally, in the early phase of these athletes' careers, the majority of the parents did not have winning or the Olympic Games as an objective of participation. Instead, they focused on their children's overall happiness, a balance of fun and development, and the general developmental benefits of sport involvement. While there was some emphasis on winning and success, these were not the predominant objectives of participation. At the same time, parents emphasised working hard, having a positive attitude and discipline. Throughout the middle and elite phases of the athletes' careers, many parents also played an important role in helping keep winning and success in perspective. Parents' roles also changed over time (from leader to follower over three phases), which supports the research of Côté (1999).

Not all research on the develop-

ment of athletic talent has been positive. Some authors have been interested in the negative side effects of intensive youth sports participation. Donnelly (1993), for example, studied 45 recently retired Canadian high-performance athletes relative to the positive and negative aspects and experiences of their childhood sports careers. His results revealed that a majority of the athletes reported some sort of family problems (such as parental pressure, and guilt about money, family time and attention given to them relative to siblings). Dietary problems were noted by some of the respondents, as was the use of performance enhancing drugs. Numerous physical and psychological problems were also noted including overtraining, lack of sleep and excessive behaviour such as excessive drinking and eating when seasons finish. The author concludes, "given the demands of high-performance programs, the greatest threat to children's social development is that adults will over-control the lives of children for the sake of achievement in sport" (Donnelly 1993, p.94).

In her highly popular book, *Little girls in pretty boxes: The making and breaking of elite gymnasts and figure skaters* (1995), investigative journalist Joan Ryan examined elite figure skating and gymnastics, which have in recent years become increasingly dominated by younger athletes. What she documented were numerous cases of eating disorders, stunted growth, debilitating injuries, weakened bones and psychological disorders among these athletes. She also reported that countless girls were broken by the pressure of elite sport and were often humiliated. Ryan concludes by questioning whether America is sacrificing girls' health and welfare in a quest for athletic greatness.

More recently, the popular American sports magazine, *Sports Illus-*

trated, has run feature stories on youth sports. For example, in 2002, a special four-part report was written on the changing nature of high school sports in America. The author, Alexander Wolff (2002), convincingly argues that the lure of college athletic scholarships and success has caused thousands of high school students to specialise in single sports and engage in year-round training. Wolff further contends that today's high school athletes are stronger and more skilled. However, a "year-round commitment to a single sport and far-flung travel for more and better competition are isolating our best young athletes from their communities and changing the all-around athletic experience that has been as the heart of American sports for generations" (p.75).

Another *Sports Illustrated* special report focused on the challenges facing today's 10-year-old athletes. In this article, Wolff (2003) contends that the days of playing multiple sports throughout the year for fun are disappearing. In contrast, at age 10, some children are asked to give up sports all together (because of a lack of ability) or arrive at a crossroads and are forced to select one sport in which to excel.

Given the above concerns with early sports specialisation and the tremendous time demands needed to develop athletic talent, burnout in young athletes has been an issue of particular concern. Coakley (1992) first reported results from interviews with 15 high-school-aged youth who had burned out of predominantly individual sports. The participants mentioned pressure and stress as primary reasons for discontinuing participation. However, Coakley indicated that this pressure was typically tied to a lack of control over their lives (for instance, they wanted to socialise with friends, but instead had to practice or participate in

competitions). The results also showed that sport participation was closely tied to young athletes' limited self-definition, supporting the notion that when young athletes see themselves only as athletes, rather than as athletes, students and friends, burnout is more likely to occur.

In a series of studies, Gould and his colleagues (Gould, Udry et al. 1996; Gould, Tuffey et al. 1996, 1997) studied burnout in junior tennis players. The first phase of the study involved a retrospective survey that was administered to 30 male and female junior tennis players identified as having burned out and 32 comparison players. The burned-out players had significantly higher burnout scores, had less input into their tennis training and tennis-related decisions, were more likely to play-up in an older age division, practiced fewer days (lessened their involvement), were less motivated and more withdrawn, were more perfectionistic (especially relative to concern over mistakes, personal standards, parental criticism, parental expectations, and higher need for organisation), and were less likely to use certain coping strategies. The burned out players did not differ from the comparison players relative to the number of hours trained. Hence, the results suggest that in this group of young athletes burnout was more psychologically than physically driven. It was also concluded that in addition to a variety of personal and situational factors, perfectionism played a particularly important role in predicting burnout in junior tennis.

The second part of the study (Gould, Tuffey et al. 1996) involved in-depth interviews with the 10 most burned-out players identified by the quantitative part of the project. Reasons for burning out included: logistical concerns, like time demands and too much travel; physical

concerns, including being sick and not being satisfied with performance; social interpersonal concerns, such as dissatisfaction with social life and negative parental influence; and the most frequently appearing factor, psychological concerns, which included such things as unfulfilled and unrealistic expectations and pressure. Recommendations for preventing and dealing with burnout included playing for one's own reasons, balancing tennis with other activities such as school clubs or socialising with friends, stopping participation if playing tennis is no fun, focusing on making tennis fun, doing things to relax, and taking time off. Players recommended that parents recognise that some parental push is needed, but it must be an optimal amount, as too much contributes to burnout. Additionally, players suggested that parents reduce importance placed on events and game outcome, have parent-coach role clarification, and solicit input from their junior player.

In the third phase of the study (Gould, Tuffey et al. 1997), researchers highlighted individual differences in burnout by discussing case profiles of three players who represented different forms of burnout. The cases included: a player characterised by high levels of perfectionism and overtraining who burned out because of her personality orientation; a player who experienced pressure from others and felt a strong need for a social life outside of tennis who burned out due to social psychological factors; and a player who was physically over trained, failed to get enough sleep, and burned out due to physical factors. Based on these three cases and the earlier phases of the study, it was concluded that burnout might best be viewed within a stress-related strain model, with a "physically-driven" strain resulting from physical

overtraining and a “psychologically-driven” strain comprised of two additional sub-strains. These psychologically driven sub-strains included: young athletes having an “at risk” perfectionistic personality that predisposes them to burnout, even in non-pressure situations; and young athletes experiencing situational stress, such as coach or parent pressure to participate and perform. These sub-strains are not totally independent.

While far from complete, these studies on the process of talent development provide us with much needed information on how to best help young athletes develop their talent. They also show that talent development does not come without costs, and with improper guidance the process of developing talent in young athletes can have severe consequences of both a physical and psychological nature. This does not mean, however, that young athletes should not be given opportunities to excel in sport. Rather, we need to provide the right opportunities to maximise gains while minimising costs.

Myths and the development of champion athletes

Given the previous overview of the research, it is clear that a gap often exists between research and actual practice in youth sports. What is happening in youth sports seems to be fuelled by a number of prevailing myths and half-truths concerning how champions develop. In this section, we identify and discuss the evidence that refutes these myths. The myths we will focus on include: athletic talent can be accurately predicted prior to puberty; more physical training and participation is better for producing top talent; stages of athletic talent development can be skipped; early sport specialisation is an effective way to develop athletic

talent; fun has to be sacrificed if a child is to develop into an elite athlete; talented children need different early sport programs than their less talented counterparts; and there are no costs to developing athletic talent. Implications for guiding practice are emphasised.

‘Individuals who achieve success early are not necessarily those individuals who become the best as adults.’

Athletic talent can be accurately predicated prior to puberty

Perpetuated by highly visible prodigies like the Williams sisters in tennis and Tiger Woods in golf, many youth-sports parents and coaches feel that athletic talent can be identified and nurtured at very early ages. Once identified, it is believed that these talented children can specialise in one sport and reap the benefits of getting a head start in achieving elite sport status. While certain athletic prodigies have been identified at an early age, research has shown that accurately identifying athletic talent is much harder than originally thought. After extensively reviewing the literature on athletic talent identification and development, Kearney (1998) concluded “that individuals who achieve success early are not necessarily those individuals who become the best as adults” (p.5). For example, in Clarke’s (1968) classic Medford growth study that longitudinally tracked the physical development of children, it was found that only one in four athletes judged to be outstanding in elementary school maintained their star status three or four years later. Moreover, if coaching, access to facilities and competitive experiences



are predominately dedicated to these early stars versus other children, late bloomers (children who physically mature later, such as basketball star Michael Jordan), who may turn out to be exceptional performers, may not get opportunities to develop.

More physical training and participation is better for producing top talent

As Ericsson, Krampe and Tesch-Romer’s (1993) research has shown, talent development in any field requires considerable deliberate practice. Thus, athletes must train many hours to hone their skills and physical abilities. At the same time, burnout and overtraining have been identified as increasing problems in high-performance sport in general and in youth sports in particular. For example, in a study of all US Atlanta Games Olympians, 28% of respondents indicated that overtraining had a negative impact on their performance (Gould et al. 2002). Thus, while young athletes with talent must work very hard to develop, the idea that “more practice and training is always better” is a myth. There are physical and psychological limits to how much training any athlete, much

less a young athlete, can endure. Thus, more and more top coaches talk about “training hard but smart” and strive to find optimally challenging but not overtaxing training regimens.

Stages of athletic talent can be skipped

The research has shown that champion athletes’ careers can be viewed in stages, from the initial stage that is characterised by fun, fundamentals and multisport involvement to an elite, highly competitive, total commitment stage at the world-class or professional level. Based on his research, Bloom (1985) also showed that stages of talent development were not skipped. That is, the champions studied did not skip the first fun and fundamental (Romance) stage and jump to the Precision or Integration stages. This only makes sense given what has been found about the discipline, motivation and determination needed to engage in 10,000 hours of deliberate practice needed to become elite. However, in what might be labelled the “Tiger Woods effect”, many contemporary parents are trying to expedite the process by skipping the initial Romance phase in hopes of achieving athletic scholarships and elite sport status for their child in the future. This usually has dire consequences, as elite performance is based on the development of proper fundamentals. More importantly, if the child does not develop an intrinsic desire and motivation for the sport, it is highly unlikely he or she will be able to sustain long-term involvement (although they may stay involved for a number of years to please their parents).

Early sport specialisation is an effective way to develop into an elite athlete

One of the biggest issues in contemporary youth sports is early sport

specialisation (often combined with year-round training) (Wiersma 2000). Children as young as 10 are being asked to specialise in a single sport in an effort to get the “edge” over their peers or because parents are afraid that their child will fall behind those children who do specialise. There is a growing concern in the sports community over this practice because the previously discussed research shows that athletic talent cannot be accurately identified prior to puberty. Thus, an early maturing child who is taller than her peers might be highly skilled in basketball at an early age, but later may be surpassed by late maturing children who become taller. However, if she is exposed to other sports when young she may be able to shift her focus to those endeavours.

Research on sport specialisation has also shown that while elite athletes often started their involvement in their specialist sport at an early age, they actually played a number of sports when they were young (Wiersma 2000). In fact, there is some evidence to show that those who specialise at a later age have more success (Barynina & Vaitsekhovskii 1992). No definitive answers exist as to why this is so, but multisport participation is thought to be advantageous to young athletes because it develops a number of fundamental motor skills (such as running, jumping, throwing, hopping), allows children to find the right sport for their body type and disposition, and helps prevent burnout and overuse injuries. Moreover, we must never forget that over 98% of these children will never become elite athletes so it is argued on ethical grounds, they should have the joy of playing multiple sports (Wiersma 2000).

This does not mean that talented young athletes should never specialise in one sport. If someone is to become a champion, a time will come to specialise (most likely in Bloom’s

(1985) middle years). However, the evidence indicates that the initial years of sport involvement are not the time to do so.

Fun has to be sacrificed if a child is to develop into an elite athlete

Research has clearly shown that years and hours of deliberate practice are needed if one is to develop into an expert performer. Moreover, Ericsson (1996) contends that deliberate practice is by its very nature often not enjoyable. Thus, anyone who is to develop into an elite performer must learn how to delay gratification and develop the discipline needed to sustain involvement. In fact, the research of Csikszentmihalyi et al. (1993) and Gould et al. (2002) has verified these conclusions.

The above findings probably explain why it is so important for athletes to fall in love with their sport during the entry years – so they will stick with it through all those hours of practice. However, recent research with professional tennis players (Gould, Lauer & Rolo 2004) also shows that during the middle and elite phases of their careers, athletes report the importance of having fun. Thus, it is a misconception to think that an emphasis on fun is not needed throughout one’s athletic career. Quite the contrary, given the tremendous effort needed to engage in deliberate practice, fun needs to be emphasised as often as possible.

Talented children need different early sport programs than their less talented counterparts

Related to the idea of early sport specialisation is the notion that talented young athletes need special entry-level programs. As previously indicated, prior to puberty, young athletes should be encouraged to participate in a number of sports for the purpose of having fun and learning

fundamentals. Moreover, the classic youth sports research by Smoll and Smith (2002b) has shown that all children need coaches who are trained to be positive and encouraging. Young athletes who play for such positive and encouraging coaches have been shown to have higher motivation, enhanced self-esteem, lower anxiety and lower dropout rates than children who play for coaches without these qualities.

There are no costs to developing athletic talent

In his book, *The psychology of high ability*, Howe (1999) concludes that any intense effort to develop talent will have costs as well as benefits, whether one is engaged in sports, the arts or academics. This does not mean we should not help children develop their athletic talents. However, parents and coaches need to be cognisant of how costs will weigh against benefits.

Summarising a US Olympic Committee Summit on Developing Young Champions (with representatives of tennis, figure skating, gymnastics, swimming and diving), Bauer, Martens and Gould (2001) concluded that organisations needed to wrestle with important philosophical issues when considering talent development in young athletes. Such questions include:

- How much money should be allocated to developing a few highly skilled athletes versus mass youth sports participation?
- What are the costs to young people who pursue world-class excellence?
- Is it healthy for children to leave home to train intensively for sporting excellence?
- For every elite success story, how many child athlete failures are there and what are the ramifications of those failures?
- What guidelines should be developed in an effort to find the

right balance between the pursuit of athletic excellence on behalf of an organisation or nation and the development of productive, healthy and happy individuals?

Summary

Our purpose in writing this paper is not to condemn those coaches and parents who work with talented young athletes pursuing athletic excellence. For, as Howe (1999, p.182) has indicated, “we cannot map people’s lives in advance, but much can be done to make desirable outcomes more likely. Acquiring high abilities is one such outcome. We can and should act to make it happen more often”. However, our concern is that the professionalisation of youth sports is causing well-meaning but uninformed individuals to guide youth sports practice on the basis of folklore and myths, which actually have negative effects on the lives of talented children and detract from the sport experience of all children. It is our hope, then, that by better understanding the research literature on talent development in young athletes, the youth sports experience will be enhanced for all children.

Note

This paper is based upon a presentation titled ‘Myths surrounding the role of youth sports in developing champions’ given by the first author at the 2003 International Youth Sports Congress, Atlanta, Georgia.

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Daniel Gould is the Bank of America Excellence (Endowed) Professor (Sport Psychology Specialization) at the University of North Carolina Greensboro and the Director of the Sport and Exercise Psychology Lab in the Department of Exercise and Sport Science at the same university.

In August of 2004 he will assume the duties of director of the Institute for the Study of Youth Sports at the Michigan State University.

Sarah Carson is a doctoral student in the Sport and Exercise Psychology Lab at the University of North Carolina Greensboro.

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- For a list of Daniel Gould's other publications, see the University of North Carolina at Greensboro web page: <<http://www.uncg.edu/~drgould/Danpublications.html>>.
- The Institute for the Study of Youth Sports (YSI), Michigan State University, which Professor Gould will direct from August 2004, 'was founded ... to research the benefits and detriments of participation in youth sports; to produce educational materials for parents, coaches, officials, and administrators, and; to provide educational programs for coaches, officials, administrators, and parents'. The YSI web site includes a number of youth sport links of relevance to coaches and parents; publications; and archives of the YSI newsletter *Spotlight on Youth Sports*. See: <<http://ed-web3.educ.msu.edu/ysi/>>.
- Han Kemper, the author of the next paper in this issue of YSA, has also recently published a paper titled 'The prevention and treatment of overweight and obesity: Summary of the advisory report by the Health Council of the Netherlands', in the *Netherlands Journal of Medicine*, v.62, n.1, 2004, pp.10-17. That paper is available online as a pdf from the *Netherlands Journal of Medicine* web site at: <<http://www.zuidencomm.nl/njm/issue.php?i=40>>.
- The Health Council of the Netherlands web site contains an executive summary of the report titled *Overweight and obesity*, which is one of the references for Professor Kemper's article in this issue of YSA. Go to: <<http://www.gr.nl/adviezen.php?ID=707>>.
- One of the references in Jimmy Calloway's paper in this issue of YSA (p.35) was a UN report titled: *Sport for development and peace: Towards achieving the Millennium Development goals: Report from the United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Sport for Development and Peace*. It was published by the United Nations in 2003 and is available as a pdf from: <<http://www.un.org/themes/sport/reportE.pdf>>.
- Conference: Active Leisure and Young People, UK
Venue: Leeds Metropolitan University, UK
Date: 13-15 July 2004
Organised by the Leisure Studies Association.
More information at: <<http://www.leisure-studies-association.info/LSAWEB/2004/Main.html>>
Contact: Jayne Caudwell, Leisure Studies Association, email: <J.Caudwell@lmu.ac.uk>
- International Outdoor Education Research Conference: Connections and Disconnections: Examining the reality and rhetoric, international perspectives on outdoor education theory and practice, Bendigo, Victoria
Date: 6-9 July 2004
Venue: La Trobe University, Bendigo, Victoria
This symposium aims to focus on the role of research in exploring how the field addresses its claims. It will ask: With what kinds of relationships and knowledge is outdoor education concerned? How important is the cultural and geographical context or the pedagogical process in developing such relationships? What is the role of broader social, cultural or education theory in understanding outdoor education? What are the connections between theory and practice and what are future directions for the field?
Selected papers will be published in a special edition of the *Australian Journal of Outdoor Education*.
Contact person: Alison Lugg, Department of Outdoor Education and Nature Tourism, La Trobe University Bendigo, PO Box 199, Bendigo, Victoria 3552
Email: <a.lugg@bendigo.latrobe.edu.au>
Fax: +61 3 5444 7848

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