

Parental Priorities and Performance Pathways: Analyzing the Influence of Pseudoscientific Beliefs in Youth Sport Development

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Abstract

This study explores how parental beliefs shaped by popular frameworks like deliberate practice and the *10,000-hour rule* influence youth sport experiences. Findings reveal parents' strong endorsement of structured, high-intensity training correlates with increased involvement but not necessarily sustainable practice or participation. Such beliefs may be associated with greater parental management, which may have implications for child autonomy and intrinsic motivation, essential for long-term engagement and wellbeing. The study highlights a cultural tension where performance-driven approaches overshadow developmental needs like play, creativity, and emotional growth. Despite widespread parental belief in sport's life-skill benefits, actual internalization by children remains limited. These results call for a reframing of youth sport practice, emphasizing exploration, autonomy, and holistic development over rigid performance metrics. The findings support shifts toward autonomy-supportive coaching and balanced sport ecologies that nurture resilience, curiosity, and identity, ultimately promoting sustained athlete growth and wellbeing beyond mere achievement.

Keywords: youth athlete development, performance culture, deliberate practice, golf

Introduction

The opportunity for businesses and brands to become regional, national, or even international entities has never been greater than it currently is, given the proliferation of social media and advances in certain technologies (e.g., digital marketing, supply chain). With the growth in both the quality and quantity of nationally relevant brands, the need for federal protection regarding brand marks has also grown. In 2000,

there were over one million active trademark registrations in the U.S. Comparatively, there were over 3.25 million active trademark registrations in 2024, more than 600 thousand than even four years prior (Gerben, 2024). It is evident that many business entities recognize the crowded marketplace in which they operate within, and understand the benefits of utilizing federally registered trademarks to protect the most salient visual elements of their brand, their logos and brand marks (Park et al., 2013).

Over the past two decades, the theory of deliberate practice pioneered by psychologist K. Anders Ericsson has significantly influenced scholarly discourse on talent development, skill acquisition, and expert performance. At its foundation, the theory asserts that exceptional achievement is not primarily a function of innate ability but rather the product of sustained, effortful, and highly structured practice over an extended period (Ericsson et al., 1993). In this framework, deliberate practice is defined as a goal-directed, feedback-informed activity that pushes the learner just beyond their current level of competence, conducted with the specific aim of improvement.

Ericsson's empirical contributions challenged long-standing beliefs about natural talent, reframing expertise not as an inborn trait but as a developmental outcome shaped by environment, opportunity, and effort. His findings emphasized the importance of access to high-quality instruction, early and consistent engagement in domain-specific activities, and the presence of motivational and social support systems (Ericsson et al., 2018). This paradigm shift redirected attention from fixed notions of *giftedness* toward dynamic experience-driven models of performance. Public interest in Ericsson's research grew exponentially following the publication of Malcolm Gladwell's *Outliers* (2008), which popularized the so-called *10,000-hour rule*. According to Gladwell's (2008) interpretation, mastery in any domain could be achieved through the accumulation of approximately 10,000 hours of focused practice. While this heuristic effectively communicated the importance of effort to a broad audience, it also introduced significant oversimplifications. Notably, it failed to capture the conditional, domain-specific nature of Ericsson et al.'s (2018) work and neglected critical variables such as instruction quality, individual differences, and developmental timing (Macnamara et al., 2014). The widespread adoption of this simplified narrative has had particular resonance in youth sport culture. Parents, coaches, and administrators often interpret success as the predictable outcome of intense, repetitive training fueled by grit, sacrifice, and early specialization. Within this logic, athletic talent is treated as a resource to be engineered through careful planning and sustained exertion, frequently at the expense of developmental balance and psychological wellbeing (Bailey & Collins, 2013; Côté et al., 2009). Such beliefs have contributed to the proliferation of year-round training regimens, early talent identification programs, and high-pressure environments that may undermine long-term athletic development and personal growth.

This study presents a focused case analysis aimed at critically interrogating this dominant framework. Specifically, it investigates the extent to which parents of young athletes subscribe to the belief that athletic success is primarily determined by deliberate practice and perseverance. Through an interdisciplinary lens that integrates developmental psychology, sport pedagogy, and sociocultural theory, the research explores how lay interpretations – and often misinterpretations – of psychological science have shaped parental expectations and youth sport programming. The paper is structured in two main sections. The first offers a comprehensive literature review that traces the diffusion of simplified or pseudo-scientific ideas about talent, effort, and expertise. This section examines how key empirical findings have been translated into reductive cultural narratives, often disconnected from the original research contexts. Particular attention is paid to how performance metrics, competitive norms, and neoliberal ideals around individual responsibility have contributed to a belief system in which effort is perceived as both the necessary and sufficient condition for success (Kane et al., 2021; Karlsson et al., 2023). The second section provides an empirically grounded counternarrative. Drawing on insights from longitudinal studies and developmental science, we outline what parents genuinely need to understand to support healthy, sustainable, and age-appropriate athletic development in their children. This includes

a discussion of multisport participation, autonomy-supportive coaching, motivation theory, and the importance of psychosocial wellbeing in the cultivation of long-term athletic engagement (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

To guide the empirical portion of this study, the following research questions were developed:

RQ1: To what extent do parents of junior golfers endorse beliefs associated with popularized interpretations of deliberate practice and the 10,000-hour rule?

RQ2: How are parental beliefs associated with reported parenting behaviors related to youth sport participation (e.g., practice structure, tournament attendance, training oversight)?

RQ3: Are parental beliefs regarding structured practice associated with parent perceptions of child psychological traits, such as grit?

Given the exploratory nature of this study and the limited sample size, no directional hypotheses were specified. Instead, the study aims to identify patterns of association that may inform future research on parental belief systems and youth sport development. Ultimately, this investigation sought to illuminate the double-edged nature of cultural narratives surrounding grit, effort, and deliberate practice. While such narratives may promote perseverance and goal orientation, they can also foster unrealistic expectations, overtraining, and burnout, especially when applied uncritically in the context of youth sport. By contrasting popularized interpretations of deliberate practice with a more nuanced evidence-based understanding of child and adolescent development, this study aimed to reframe the discourse around athletic excellence.

Rather than conceiving youth sport as a linear, quantifiable path to mastery, this paper advocates for a more holistic perspective, one that values balance, intrinsic motivation, psychological safety, and the complex contextual realities that shape athletic trajectories. Junior golf provides a particularly relevant context in which to examine parental belief systems about deliberate practice and structured training. Unlike many youth team sports, golf development frequently involves individualized coaching, significant financial investment, and high levels of parental logistical support. These structural characteristics may intensify parental involvement in practice scheduling, tournament participation, and coaching decisions. As a result, junior golf offers a useful case study for examining how popularized narratives about deliberate practice and skill accumulation may translate into parenting behaviors within youth sport environments.

Literature Review

The Rise of Misapplied Developmental Models in Youth Sport

Over the past several decades, the popular understanding of youth athletic development has been shaped more by culturally resonant myths and reductive heuristics than by empirically grounded developmental science (Williams & Hodges, 2005). Central among these is the Long-Term Athlete Development (LTAD) model, widely adopted in institutional sport planning across North America and Europe. Originally conceptualized within state-run sport systems – particularly in the Soviet Union – LTAD functioned as a national policy framework aimed at maximizing elite athletic output (Lloyd et al., 2015). Balyi et al.'s (2013) version of the model, with its discrete stages (e.g., FUNdamentals, Training to Train, Training to Compete, Training to Win), offered a seemingly coherent developmental roadmap. However, the transposition of LTAD from elite athlete pathways to general youth sport contexts has led to a range of developmental mismatches and misapplications (Farrow & Buszard, 2017; Varghese et al., 2022). This misapplication reflects a broader cultural tendency to frame childhood as a phase to be optimized rather

than experienced. In increasingly competitive and commercialized youth sport ecosystems, LTAD is frequently interpreted as a rigid, prescriptive sequence rather than a flexible guide adaptable to individual needs. The linear logic of *early investment equals future success* dovetails with dominant societal ideologies emphasizing performance, meritocracy, and quantifiable achievement (Twenge & Campbell, 2009). As a result, youth sport has been recast as a proving ground not only for child talent but for parental competence and aspiration.

This cultural shift must be situated within changing parental ideologies, particularly those shaped by rising fears about child safety and declining social trust. In response, parents increasingly sought adult-supervised, institutionalized settings as safer alternatives. Youth sport – with its boundaries, coaches, and credentialing – offered a seemingly secure and socially sanctioned developmental space (Spaaij & Schulenkorf, 2014). Parental participation in these systems is not merely logistical but deeply ideological. Structured sport came to symbolize both safety and self-actualization – sites where children could be kept away from perceived threats while simultaneously cultivating discipline, character, and upward mobility.

The scientific veneer to these parental practices arrived in the form of K. Anders Ericsson's theory of deliberate practice. His landmark study on violinists concluded that expert performance was primarily the result of sustained, effortful, and targeted practice rather than innate talent (Ericsson et al., 1993). The suggestion that elite musicians had accumulated around 10,000 hours of such practice by early adulthood became an alluring metric. Gladwell (2008) further amplified this idea for popular audiences, coining the now-infamous *10,000-hour rule*. Yet, this simplification belied the complexity of Ericsson's et al.'s (1993) findings. In turning a probabilistic trend into a deterministic formula, Gladwell (2008) overlooked significant individual variability and the myriad sociocultural and psychological variables mediating performance (Hambrick et al., 2020). Parents, already primed by cultural narratives of control and optimization, readily adopted this metric as a developmental target. Correspondingly, training hours became both the currency and the moral proof of good parenting.

However, empirical scrutiny has steadily undermined the universality and determinism of the deliberate practice model. Gobet and Campitelli's (2007) study of chess players revealed a wide variation in the hours required to reach master-level proficiency – ranging from 3,016 to 23,608 hours – an eightfold difference that highlights the influence of factors beyond practice alone. Their correlation between deliberate practice and skill level ($r = .42$) represents only a moderate relationship. Further, Macnamara et al.'s (2014) meta-analysis across multiple domains found that deliberate practice accounted for just 1% of variance in elite-level performance in sport. These findings suggest that while practice is necessary, it is far from sufficient. Factors such as genetics, socioeconomic access, psychological resilience, emotional support systems, and even sheer chance play crucial roles in shaping developmental trajectories.

Coaching Gaps and the Transmission of Misconceptions

Ironically, many coaches – the supposed translators of developmental science – lack a robust understanding of skill acquisition theory themselves. In fact, extant research has found significant gaps in coaches' comprehension of motor learning principles, particularly among those working in golf and other early-specialization sports (Grecic & Collins, 2012; Grecic et al., 2013). Without a firm grasp of developmental science, even well-meaning coaches often reproduce simplified or outdated models, further entrenching misinformation within both coaching and parental communities (Reade et al., 2010). The appeal of the grit narrative which positions success as a function of self-discipline, effort, and delayed gratification persists not because it is scientifically sound, but because it resonates with broader cultural values of personal responsibility and moral worth (Brylinsky, 2010; Duckworth & Quinn, 2009). For many

parents, promoting grit through rigorous sport participation is not just about optimizing their child's potential but performing virtue through effort.

The Commercialization of Pseudoscience

The proliferation of the deliberate practice myth has also been materially incentivized by the rapid commercialization of youth sport. In 2025, the youth sport industry in the United States was valued at \$40 billion, encompassing specialized training academies, private coaching, showcases, and elite travel teams (Drape & Belson, 2025). Many of these enterprises cite decontextualized or oversimplified scientific findings to market services, reinforcing pseudoscientific narratives while profiting from parental anxieties. Consequently, pseudoscience is no longer just a set of mistaken beliefs. Rather, it has become embedded within the economic and institutional architecture of youth athletic development. The very structures that shape children's sporting experiences are often misaligned with evidence-based developmental principles and may even incentivize approaches that are psychologically and physically detrimental.

In contrast to these reductionist models, a growing body of research from developmental psychology, sport pedagogy, and educational theory underscores the centrality of autonomy, intrinsic motivation, and unstructured play in promoting long-term engagement and well-being (Gray et al., 2023; Wulf & Shea, 2002). These dimensions, historically marginalized in performance-centric discourses, are now recognized as foundational to healthy development. Gray et al.'s (2023) summary review presented compelling evidence that the erosion of self-directed play has contributed to rising anxiety, depression, and emotional dysregulation in youth sports. Similarly, Twenge and Park (2017) identified the displacement of autonomous activity by adult-organized programming as a key factor in declining adolescent mental health. Even structured interventions intended to help children may backfire when misaligned with developmental needs. Historical research also illustrates that well-intentioned interventions can produce unintended developmental consequences, as research demonstrates structured mentorship programs often do not produce expected developmental benefits and, in some cases, are associated with detrimental long-term outcomes (McCord, 1978, 2007). Such research underscores the importance of aligning youth interventions with developmental principles, shifting from assumptions that increased parental involvement improves outcomes.

Youth Sport Design and Parenting

A growing number of studies now emphasize the need for Positive Youth Development (PYD) frameworks that prioritize holistic growth over performance metrics. These models emphasize life skills, community belonging, and self-efficacy, outcomes that are less tangible but more predictive of long-term success and wellbeing (Grecic & Collins, 2012). Upenieks et al.'s (2024) longitudinal study of nearly 4,000 participants demonstrated that sustained voluntary sport participation in adolescence is associated with improved adult mental health. Critically, those who dropped out early citing pressure, burnout, or lack of enjoyment experienced significantly poorer outcomes. These findings reinforce that participation alone is insufficient. The conditions under which youth engage with sport – namely autonomy, joy, and intrinsic motivation – are essential. In response, scholars have argued for a redefinition of supportive parenting in youth sport. Rather than managing performance, parents should prioritize emotional attunement, encourage exploratory learning, and support identity formation (Kramers et al., 2023). Children are not linear systems to be optimized through inputs of time and money but rather dynamic and adaptive individuals whose development is shaped by complex interactions between biology, environment, and personal meaning-making (Bandura, 1965; Rotter, 1966).

The prevailing models of youth athletic development – fueled by pseudoscience, cultural anxiety, and commercial interests – have led to the widespread adoption of practices that often undermine the very

goals they aim to achieve. The myth of the 10,000-hour rule, the valorization of grit, and the misapplication of LTAD have created a youth sport culture that prioritizes performance at the expense of psychological wellbeing. A growing interdisciplinary consensus calls for a paradigmatic shift. The most reliable predictors of athletic and personal success are not repetition or regimentation, but autonomy-supportive relationships, meaningful engagement, and self-regulated exploration (Bandura, 1965; Mischel & Ebbsen, 1970). Moving beyond simplistic and deterministic models toward more nuanced, evidence-based frameworks is critical to not only supporting athletic excellence, but to safeguarding the developmental integrity and human potential of the children who pursue it.

Methodology

This study utilized a cross-sectional survey design to explore the relationship between parental beliefs about youth sport development and specific parenting behaviors related to their children's involvement in competitive junior golf. Conducted in collaboration with the Southern Texas Section of the Professional Golfers' Association (PGA) during the Spring of 2024, the research employed a digital survey format to enable broad and asynchronous participation. This approach minimized access barriers for a geographically dispersed population and is a common methodology in sport psychology and education research for identifying correlational trends at a single point in time (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The participants comprised parents or legal guardians of junior golfers actively engaged in the Southern Texas PGA's youth development programs. Recruitment occurred via an email invitation sent through the organization's official parent mailing list. Eligibility criteria required respondents to be at least 18 years old and to have a child currently enrolled in competitive junior golf. A total of 48 parents completed the survey in entirety and were included in the final analysis. Participation was voluntary and uncompensated.

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted through a modified 22-item online questionnaire developed by the research team in consultation with experts in sport psychology and youth athletic development. Hosted on a secure *Qualtrics* platform, the survey remained open for four weeks. The instrument incorporated both closed-ended and Likert-scale items to assess constructs relevant to the study including parental beliefs about talent development, parenting behaviors related to sport involvement (e.g., frequency of attendance at competitions and practice sessions, training oversight, financial investment in coaching or equipment), perceptions of child traits such as grit and motivation (adapted from the Grit-S scale; Duckworth & Quinn, 2009), and demographic characteristics (e.g., parent gender, age, race/ethnicity, marital status, education, household income, former athlete status – defined as competitive sports participation beyond high school). Parental beliefs around talent development were solicited with reference to popular psychological frameworks such as Gladwell's (2008) 10,000-hour rule and Ericsson et al.'s (1993) theory of deliberate practice. The survey was pilot tested with five parents from a similar youth sport organization to ensure clarity and face validity, resulting in minor revisions to improve item wording and layout before formal distribution.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics summarized demographic variables and baseline characteristics. Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were computed to examine relationships between parental beliefs and reported behaviors. Dependent variables included children's weekly training hours, frequency of parental involvement in practices and tournaments, psychological traits of the child (e.g., grit), and the financial and logistical support provided by parents. All analyses were conducted using SPSS Version 28.0, with a significance threshold set at $p < .05$. In cases of non-normal distribution, Spearman's rho was used as

a non-parametric alternative. Participation was entirely voluntary, with electronic informed consent obtained prior to survey commencement. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. No personally identifiable information was collected, and all data were anonymized to ensure confidentiality.

Results

This study analyzed responses from a sample of 48 parents of junior golfers affiliated with the Southern Texas PGA. Statistical models were adjusted for demographic covariates, including parent gender, age, race/ethnicity, marital status, education level, and former athlete status. The results below summarize the observed correlations between specific parental beliefs and parenting behaviors relevant to their child's sport development. A further summary of findings can be found in Table 1.

Table 1

Summary of Key Findings

Parental Belief	Behavioral Outcome	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>
Deliberate Practice	Weekly practice hours	.33	<.05
Deliberate Practice	Tournament attendance	.27	<.05
Deliberate Practice	Training oversight	.35	<.05
Daily Training	Practice hours	.28	<.05
Daily Training	Tournament attendance	.40	<.01

Parental Beliefs & Practice Behaviors

Analysis of parental beliefs and their relationship to practice behaviors revealed several nuanced patterns. In terms of the number of practice days per week, most parental beliefs demonstrated weak or inconsistent associations. However, two specific beliefs reached statistical significance. Parents who believed that hiring a private golf coach is necessary were more likely to report a higher number of weekly practice days ($r = 0.17$, $p < .05$). In contrast, those who held the belief that daily training guarantees success were paradoxically associated with fewer weekly practice days ($r = -0.23$, $p < .05$). This counterintuitive finding may reflect a disconnect between aspirational belief and logistical or emotional realities, such as overscheduling, time constraints, or early signs of athlete burnout (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2008).

When examining weekly hours of practice, stronger associations emerged. Parents who endorsed the concept of deliberate practice, as outlined by Gladwell (2008) and rooted in Ericsson et al.'s (1993) foundational work, were significantly more likely to report higher weekly practice hours ($r = 0.33$, $p < .05$). Similarly, belief in daily training also correlated positively with time invested in practice ($r = 0.28$, $p < .05$).

These findings indicate that endorsement of structured, consistent, and effortful training aligns with greater time investment from children, supporting previous research on the behavioral manifestations of deliberate practice ideology (Macnamara et al., 2014).

Parental attendance at training sessions showed modest but positive correlations with belief in deliberate practice ($r = 0.19$) and the value of hiring a private coach ($r = 0.17$). While not statistically significant, these trends suggest that parents who emphasize expert guidance and structured training are more likely to be present during practice sessions, reinforcing a hands-on developmental approach. Stronger associations were observed in relation to tournament attendance. Parents who endorsed the key message of Gladwell (2008) were significantly more likely to attend tournaments ($r = 0.27, p < .05$), as were those who believed in the necessity of daily training ($r = 0.40, p < .01$). This pattern suggests that parents who equate success with repetitive, high-effort engagement are more likely to seek out competitive environments, potentially viewing tournaments as markers of developmental progress (Bailey & Collins, 2013).

Active parental oversight of training was positively correlated with multiple belief systems. Specifically, belief in deliberate practice ($r = 0.35, p < .05$), belief in the value of playing many tournaments ($r = 0.37, p < .05$), and belief in daily training ($r = 0.27, p < .05$) all predicted higher levels of parental involvement in planning or supervising training sessions. These results suggest that structured, performance-oriented belief systems often translate into more directive parenting styles in the athletic context. Finally, parent-reported child grit scores were significantly associated with several parental beliefs. Positive correlations were found with belief in deliberate practice ($r = 0.37, p < .05$), hiring a private coach ($r = 0.35, p < .05$), and daily training ($r = 0.37, p < .05$). These findings suggest an association between parental belief systems and parent-reported child perseverance. This aligns with existing literature linking high parental expectations and structured support to the emergence of psychological resilience (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2000). However, it is important to note that causality cannot be inferred from these correlations alone.

Interpretation of Specific Beliefs & Behavioral Outcomes

Moving beyond isolated correlations, the study also examined how individual beliefs functioned within larger systems of parenting logic. The belief in Gladwell's (2008) *10,000-hour rule* was significantly associated with greater parental attendance at tournaments ($r = 0.27, p < .05$). This suggests that parents who believe success is primarily the result of accumulated hours of practice may view competitive exposure as integral to development. However, this belief was not significantly correlated with other behavioral metrics (e.g., training frequency, grit), suggesting a possible disconnect between ideology and applied parenting strategy.

General resonance with the themes of Gladwell (2008) without specific endorsement of the 10,000-hour principle did not predict any significant behavioral outcomes. This finding reflects a broader phenomenon in the public understanding of research, wherein affective agreement with psychological theories often fails to translate into concrete action or implementation. In contrast, belief in deliberate practice was the most behaviorally consistent and integrated belief across all measures. This belief was significantly correlated with increased weekly practice hours, tournament attendance, parental training oversight, and child grit. These patterns reflect the cohesive logic of deliberate practice as originally theorized by Ericsson et al. (1993; i.e., goal-directed, feedback-rich, effortful repetition). However, while structured involvement can foster developmental gains, it may also carry risks of overregulation and diminished child autonomy if not tempered by attention to intrinsic motivation and psychological wellbeing (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

The belief that children should play many tournaments correlated positively with parental oversight of

training ($r = 0.37, p < .05$) but exhibited a slight negative correlation with child grit ($r = -0.12$). This may indicate that an overemphasis on competitive exposure, rather than skill development or enjoyment, could undermine intrinsic motivation or heighten performance anxiety, particularly in younger athletes (Côté et al., 2009). Belief in the value of hiring a private coach was associated with more frequent practice days ($r = 0.17, p < .05$), increased parental attendance at training sessions ($r = 0.17$), and higher grit scores in children ($r = 0.35, p < .05$). This aligns with models of high-investment parenting, in which external expertise is mobilized as a developmental resource (Kane et al., 2021). However, the long-term outcomes of such strategies likely depend on the child's emotional experience and sense of agency within these externally structured systems.

Finally, belief in daily training exhibited the most consistent and wide-ranging behavioral effects. It was positively associated with greater weekly practice hours, tournament attendance, parental oversight of training, and child grit. Interestingly, it was negatively associated with the number of practice days per week ($r = -0.23, p < .05$). This paradox may reflect the tension between rigid expectations and lived realities, where parents committed to daily training ideals may find them difficult to sustain, leading to overcompensation in intensity or eventual disengagement. This dissonance highlights a recurring theme in intensive parenting: that rigid belief systems can clash with children's developmental needs and limit flexibility in family routines (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2008; Côté et al., 2009).

Discussion

This study set out to examine how parental beliefs about youth athletic development – particularly those influenced by popular psychological frameworks such as deliberate practice and the 10,000-hour rule – shape parenting behaviors and, by extension, youth sport experiences. The findings reveal a landscape shaped not only by parental aspirations, but also by cultural narratives that prioritize optimization, competition, and performance over developmental coherence. While the theory of deliberate practice (Ericsson et al., 1993) offered a paradigm-shifting view of expertise grounded in structured, goal-directed effort, its popular translation has often been reductive. What began as a nuanced model of expert performance has, in many circles, been distilled into a rigid formula that achievement is a simple function of accumulated hours (Gladwell, 2008). Our data suggest that this belief, although widespread, is frequently misapplied in youth sport settings, particularly by well-intentioned parents who translate it into managerial approaches to their children's training.

Parent participants in this study who strongly endorsed beliefs in daily training, frequent competition, and the necessity of private coaching were significantly more likely to take an active role in structuring their child's athletic routines. These behaviors included overseeing training, attending competitions, and making deliberate efforts to increase practice intensity. On the surface, such involvement may appear supportive or even beneficial. However, the correlational patterns revealed underlying tensions. Although these beliefs were linked to increased child grit, a marker of perseverance, they were not consistently associated with sustainable practice habits or greater frequency of participation. In fact, the belief in daily training was negatively correlated with the actual number of weekly practice days, suggesting a gap between aspiration and reality, possibly due to athlete fatigue, overscheduling, or motivational decline (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2008). In addition, high-performance belief systems appear to extend beyond structured practice to broader parental behaviors. Parents who strongly endorsed performance-oriented narratives were more likely to assume control over tournament schedules, psychological framing, and training logistics. While such involvement may reflect deep commitment, it also introduces the risk of over-parenting, where adult agendas overshadow child autonomy (Grolnick, 2002). Developmental science has repeatedly emphasized that autonomy-supportive environments foster motivation, wellbeing,

and resilience, while controlling contexts tend to produce anxiety, disengagement, and eventual dropout (Côté et al., 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

These findings resonate with broader critiques of the industrialized youth sport model. As Smoll and Smith (2011) argued, when sport becomes a vehicle for adult ambition rather than a space for child growth, its developmental value erodes. The overemphasis on structured, adult-led activities can displace critical components of learning (i.e., play, creativity, peer relationships, intrinsic motivation). Indeed, play is not simply a recreational activity; it is a core mechanism of cognitive, emotional, and social development (Burdette & Whitaker, 2005). Yet, in many contemporary sport environments play has been subordinated to performance and curiosity has been supplanted by compliance. The data from this study also highlights a broader cultural contradiction. While many of the parents surveyed likely experienced relatively unstructured, play-based childhoods, they now find themselves adopting hyper-structured, performance-driven strategies in an effort to *protect* their children's future. This contradiction reflects a kind of developmental dissonance as the intention to support often manifests as pressure, and the pursuit of excellence increasingly overrides a child's own interests or developmental needs.

Recent national data reinforces this observation. The 2024 survey conducted by First Tee and The Harris Poll found that while 93% of parents believe sport helps children acquire life skills, significantly fewer report that their children have actually internalized such values. Only 45% of parents, for example, believe their children have learned honesty through sport while 42% cite work ethic, 39% creativity, 34% open-mindedness, and just 23% curiosity. These gaps reflect a disconnect between aspirations and outcomes, a disconnect that mirrors the patterns observed in this study. Parents may pursue performance-enhancing strategies with the intention of fostering character and success, but in doing so they may inadvertently suppress the very qualities they hope to cultivate. This discrepancy is not merely anecdotal. It signals a larger paradigm in need of reconsideration. A developmental model that equates structure with support and time with progress risks becoming self-defeating. While structure and effort are undeniably important, their developmental value is contingent upon context, meaning, and emotional climate. As Bronfenbrenner (1979) emphasized, development unfolds within interdependent systems (i.e., home, school, peer group, community), each of which is shaped by distinct values, expectations, and relationships. When those systems prioritize outcomes over experience, they compromise the holistic growth of the child.

Accordingly, this study calls for a reframing of what practice means in youth sport. Instead of viewing practice as purely instrumental (i.e., a path to mastery defined by repetition and output), it must be reconceptualized as a space for exploration, self-discovery, and relational growth. Practice should not only hone skills but also nurture emotional resilience, curiosity, intrinsic motivation, and the social competencies that define mature athletes and well-rounded individuals (Light & Harvey, 2017). This reframing is not merely theoretical. It has practical implications for coaches, program administrators, and parents. Programs that prioritize long-term development over short-term performance tend to produce more sustained engagement and lower dropout rates (Côté et al., 2009). Autonomy-supportive coaching practices, peer-led training opportunities, and the intentional inclusion of free play are all empirically supported interventions that promote athlete well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Fraser-Thomas et al., 2008).

Practical Implications

The present findings have several implications for youth sport stakeholders. Primarily, coach education programs would benefit from addressing common misconceptions surrounding deliberate practice and talent development. Providing coaches with clearer frameworks for communicating developmentally appropriate training expectations to parents could reduce pressure for excessive practice or tournament participation. Correspondingly, parent education initiatives within youth sport organizations could assist

in helping families better understand the role of enjoyment and diversified activity in long-term youth athletic development. Workshops or informational materials could clarify that structured practice is only one component of a healthy developmental environment. Sport governing bodies may consider integrating these insights into program design and policy frameworks as developmental models emphasizing balanced participation and athlete autonomy help mitigate pressures associated with performance-oriented parenting cultures.

The implications of this study also align with a growing policy shift. In response to widespread concerns about burnout, overtraining, and early specialization, numerous national sport bodies now advocate for models such as Long-Term Athlete Development (LTAD) and Positive Youth Development through Sport (PYD-S), which emphasize age-appropriate training, psychological safety, and holistic wellbeing (Balyi & Hamilton, 2004; Holt et al., 2017). The findings here support these models, suggesting that performance-centric beliefs may lead to high involvement but also carry developmental risks. Rather than pursuing narrow pathways to elite success, families and sport organizations must embrace a more inclusive and balanced developmental ecology, one that treats young athletes not as products to be optimized but as people to be understood, supported, and inspired.

Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. The sample size ($n = 48$) limits the statistical power of the analyses and increases the likelihood that observed correlations may be unstable or sensitive to sample characteristics. As a result, the findings should be interpreted as exploratory rather than definitive. In addition, the study focuses exclusively on parents of junior golfers within one regional PGA youth development system. Youth golf possesses structural characteristics that distinguish it from many other youth sports, including higher financial barriers to entry, greater reliance on private coaching, and individualized competition structures. These features shape parental beliefs and behaviors in ways that differ from team-based sports or lower-cost participation environments. Consequently, the generalizability of these findings to broader youth sport populations should be approached with caution. All key measures were based on parent self-reporting—including assessments of parenting behavior and perceptions of children's psychological traits—introducing potential risks of common method bias and social desirability effects. Future studies would benefit from incorporating multi-informant designs (e.g., athlete self-report, coach assessments) or behavioral observation. Given the cross-sectional design of this study, the ability to draw conclusions about developmental processes or long-term outcomes is also limited. Longitudinal designs would better illuminate how parental belief systems influence youth sport trajectories over time.

Conclusion & Future Research

The findings of this study highlight a fundamental contradiction at the center of contemporary youth sport. The ongoing dominance of high-intensity, structured training paradigms often derived from the logic of deliberate practice (Ericsson et al., 1993) persists in spite of growing evidence that such approaches are increasingly misaligned with the lived developmental needs of children. While the deliberate practice framework was once heralded as a roadmap to excellence, our data suggests it may no longer be tenable either in principle or in application. Rather than refining developmental outcomes, the observed patterns may reflect tensions between performance-oriented parenting beliefs and the lived experiences of youth athletes. These patterns are not simply logistical inefficiencies, but symptoms of a deeper systemic malaise characterized by over-scheduling, reduced autonomy, and an erosion of intrinsic motivation (Gray et al., 2023; Macnamara et al., 2014). Our findings reinforce what a growing body of scholarship has long argued – that youth development cannot be reduced to inputs and outputs, nor can success be engineered through volume alone (Hambrick et al., 2020; Wulf & Shea, 2002). The mechanistic framing

of youth athletes as malleable performers in pursuit of elite status has obscured the psychosocial costs incurred along the way, particularly the narrowing of children's agency, emotional resilience, and capacity for joy in and through sport.

This tension is particularly evident in the strong association found between parental belief in deliberate practice and increased oversight and control. While such involvement is often framed as supportive, our data suggests it may encroach upon the developmental foundations of autonomy and intrinsic motivation – both of which are essential for sustained engagement and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This over-management risks transforming sport into a site of obligation rather than opportunity, narrowing the developmental benefits it purports to provide. The First Tee and Harris Poll's (2024) survey offers further validation of this trend, revealing widespread parental unease not with sport itself, but with the culture of relentless optimization that has come to dominate it. Although 93% of surveyed parents believe sport promotes vital life skills, far fewer report that their children are actually acquiring them (First Tee & The Harris Poll, 2024). This gap between aspiration and outcome reflects a broader disillusionment. After nearly two decades of chasing the 10,000-hour ideal, families are increasingly questioning whether the sacrifices of time, money, and childhood experience are yielding the promised developmental returns. In retrospect, the deliberate practice model popularized in both academic literature and mainstream culture has functioned less as a scientific framework than as a cultural script. It offered certainty in a world increasingly defined by ambiguity and provided parents a sense of agency amid competitive educational and athletic landscapes (Gladwell, 2008; Spaaij & Schulenkorf, 2014). Yet as with all scripts, its power lies in repetition, not reflection. What emerges now is a need not for more practice, but for deeper questioning.

To meaningfully reimagine the youth sport landscape, future research must move beyond reductionist models of skill acquisition and examine the broader developmental ecologies in which sport is embedded. This includes attending to the psychological, social, and emotional contexts that shape children's experiences, not merely their performance outputs. Emerging research in developmental psychology and sport pedagogy underscores the importance of autonomy-supportive environments, play-based learning, and peer-driven engagement as key predictors of both participation and personal growth (Gray et al., 2023; Upenieks et al., 2024). In addition, more work is needed to understand how parenting beliefs are socially transmitted, culturally reinforced, and institutionally incentivized. Scholars should investigate how economic pressures, media narratives, and commercial sport enterprises shape parental decision-making and developmental expectations (Macnamara et al., 2014). Longitudinal research could also provide insight into how youth athletes' experiences in different sport ecologies influence adult outcomes (e.g., mental health, life satisfaction, the internalization of values). Qualitative inquiry may be especially useful in illuminating the lived contradictions and adaptive strategies of families navigating high-performance sport cultures. Understanding the meaning-making processes of children and parents alike will be essential for designing interventions that honor complexity and promote sustainable engagement.

Ultimately, this study adds to a growing body of evidence calling for a fundamental reevaluation of how success is conceptualized and cultivated in youth sport. The path forward is not merely a matter of refining existing training protocols, but of shifting the underlying assumptions that drive them. Children are not raw material to be optimized through repetition. Rather, they are dynamic, self-organizing individuals whose flourishing depends on environments rich in joy, autonomy, and meaningful relationships (Bandura, 1965; Rotter, 1966). Rather than pursuing excellence through mechanized models of training, future sport systems must foreground the full spectrum of human development. This includes cultivating curiosity alongside competence, resilience alongside rigor, and identity alongside achievement. Only by centering these values can youth sport fulfill its broader promise, not merely as a performance pipeline, but as a formative space for becoming.

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