

Determining an Individual's Talent Potential

What criteria are used by people who say a child has "natural talent"?

An individual's potential talent is derived from a combination of factors that are rooted in heredity and nurture during childhood that manifests itself as their personality. Raw or undeveloped talent requires opportunity and training. Heredity and nurture greatly influence one's ability to take advantage of training.

Genuinely talented children may exhibit a natural ability and coordination to perform in any athletic activity, but their body type (height and weight), bone structure, and other genetic attributes may suggest that specific types of activities will produce better or lower odds for success.

The lack of height and explosive jumping ability is not desirable in basketball. Physical strength is rewarded in weight lifting and specific offensive and defensive positions in football. Some physical limitations can be overcome by the desire to pursue correct technique and can withstand the rigors of mental and physical training.

Some children seem more advanced for their age; they tend to excel because they are faster or stronger, and better coordinated. These are the ones that are often labeled 'talented'.

Exceptional talent is extremely rare. In figure skating, many younger skaters are fearless and throw themselves into jumps. Because of their relatively small size and weight, they start attempting multi-revolution jumps before they have acquired the skill of "jumping".

Younger skaters frequently pre-rotate the jump takeoffs, wrap their free leg in the air, and/or under rotate the landings. These are very bad technical faults that are best avoided or the skater will spend lots of time and energy correcting these deficiencies in the future as they grow in height and increase in weight.

Many skaters lack the personal drive or determination to correct basic technical problems as they advance to the novice, and above, tests.

The successful competitive skater must have talent and parents who can afford the financial, emotional and physical support, plus the ability to tolerate the stress of year round training while full filling commitments to schoolwork and other activities.

Skaters who participate in pairs and dance or on a synchronized skating team must also have personality traits that are constructive and positive social development skills. The final pieces of the puzzle needed to succeed in figure skating include selecting a competent coach and scheduling practice times at reasonable hours are.

Early physical maturation should not be confused with talent. The earlier physical development occurs, the easier it is to complete simple skills; however, these skills may not be technically correct.

The disadvantages of less efficient technique will become apparent when the skater tries to employ this technique when executing more advanced skills such as multi-rotational jumps.

Skaters may place higher in lower levels of competitions because they can perform simple tasks, but acquiring fundamentally correct, efficient technique is necessary to achieve long-term success.

Figure skating overall favors late physical maturation because of the favorable weight to strength ratio and because there is a longer period of time for skaters to acquire correct technique prior to their body undergoing physical changes.

Early physical maturation in boys is an advantage in some sports, but the opposite applies in girls like gymnastics, figure skating, etc. where the delayed preadolescent physique seems to have an advantage. The following list of sports ranks the advantage of early maturation through to late maturation:

- alpine skiing
- track and field events
- tennis
- volley ball
- Ice Hockey
- Speed skating
- swimming
- synchronized swimming
- soccer
- water skiing
- diving
- figure skating
- gymnastics

Girls who physically mature early experience a socialization process, which tends to discourage them from participating in physical exercise and sports as they become interested in boys. On the other hand, girls who mature when they are older have been sheltered from the social pressures relating to competitive athletics for girls and thus are better prepared to handle social pressures associated with dating.

All skaters make errors, even talented ones. It takes a trained eye to determine whether the error is a serious, chronic error or just a normal part of the learning progress. Skills in a development phase are often performed at a slow speed by the skater and frequently result in a fall.

Speed plus good technique is desirable but no speed and poor technique is a developmental disaster. Some coaches teach that the same speed used to perform big, high, single revolution jumps should be the standard used to teach multi-revolution jumps.

Coaches, who use the Gus Lussi systematic teaching approach, feel it is important to first master a fast back scratch spin since that the basic jump in-air position, and the exiting position of the spin is the landing position of multi-revolution jumps.

The combination of jumping from a secure edge and achieving maximum height is extremely important in the later phases that require jumping skills to be performed with the skater under complete control and moving over the ice at full power. The ability to skate fast properly should be trained as early as possible so speed is incorporated into each new skill as soon as possible.

When jumping skills are properly executed and the jumps are performed fully rotated the quality is rewarded with + 1 and +2 GOE marks in IJS competition events.

Executing skills incorrectly seems to be the norm in many rinks because of the pressure on coaches to win competitions. Parents sometimes pressure coaches to adhere to arbitrary schedules causes skaters to develop technique detrimental to future progress.

Bad habits, once acquired, are nearly impossible to change.

Early competitive success based on the incorrect execution of simple skills is not a reliable indicator of future success. In fact, pursuing poor technique is a good way to limit future success. The risk of this developing is high in talented, but poorly trained skaters.

Coaches who succumb to parental pressure are more concerned with their income than what is best for the skater. The danger is most often seen in those skaters whose early physical maturity allows them to utilize their greater strength and leverage to compensate for inefficient/poor technique.

Neither parents, coaches, judges, or talent scouts are able to accurately predict nor can they guarantee future success based on performance at a young age. Evaluations that are based on isolated performances or on the results of a single competition, should be accepted with caution.

A professional assessment of talent would include an analysis of the child's personality and genetic background to predict physical stature by establishing a baseline using parents, siblings, and grandparents.

Reference Resource -
Borms, J.: The Growth of Physical Characteristics in Male and Female Children. *Journal of Sports Medicine*, 19, 1995. pp 373-392