

In sport, talent and opportunity often take the spotlight—but new research shows that grit may be the real differentiator in long-term success. A study of elite youth soccer players revealed that athletes who displayed higher levels of grit—defined as perseverance and passion for long-term goals—consistently accumulated more hours of practice throughout their development. Even modest early differences in practice time grew exponentially over the years, demonstrating that mental traits can amplify effort in ways that produce significant performance gaps later on.

From Small Gains to Big Leaps

The research uncovered a clear “snowball effect.” Grittier athletes didn’t just work harder at one point in time—they sustained that effort year after year. By age 15, players high in grit had logged nearly 20% more total practice hours than their peers. Interestingly, two components of grit—consistency of interest and perseverance of effort—influenced performance at different stages. Consistency of interest helped athletes stay engaged early in their development, while perseverance of effort became crucial during adolescence when training demands intensified.

Why This Matters for Developing Athletes

This pattern highlights an essential lesson for coaches, parents, and performers alike: success isn’t just about starting strong—it’s about sustaining effort when motivation wanes. Developing grit requires cultivating both long-term passion and the discipline to persist through setbacks. By emphasizing mental skills alongside physical training, coaches can help young athletes build the resilience needed to thrive through the natural ups and downs of their journey toward expertise.

How to Apply It

1. Encourage goal consistency: Help athletes connect daily practice to long-term aspirations.
2. Reward persistence, not just results: Celebrate effort and discipline as much as performance outcomes.
3. Normalize struggle: Reframe challenges as essential steps in growth rather than signs of failure.
4. Reflect regularly: Use brief check-ins to reinforce progress and recalibrate focus when needed.

Over time, these practices transform small, steady efforts into extraordinary achievements—proving that grit may be the ultimate competitive advantage in sport.

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Reference

Cocić, D., Larkin, P., Hendry, D. T., Williams, A. M., O'Connor, D., & Bilalić, M. (2025). How small differences grow over time – The snowball effect of grit on practice in sport. *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 23(5), 830–852. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1612197X.2024.2359476>