



The power of competitive focus

Dr. Russell James III
Texas Tech University

A special case: Competitive focus

Decisions dominated by the short-term, impulsive self tend to reduce future happiness

1. Excessive future discounting
2. Finding negative addictions
3. Avoiding positive addictions

But, for some, decision training is also important because of the potential for **competitive mastery** resulting from focus.

Focus in the dual-self model

Long-term
Patient
Planner
Impartial spectator
Deliberative
Cold state

The rider can understand
the cumulative benefits
of focus over many years.

Short-term
Impulsive
Doer
Passions
Affective/Visceral
Hot state

The elephant gets
bored with
repetition and
wants to move on
to the next new
experience.



In standard consumption economics, focusing is often bad

Variety is important because diminishing marginal utility changes preferences. When enjoyment drops, we should switch to another choice.

Hot Dogs Consumed	Utility from Each Hot Dog
1	+10
2	+4
3	0
4	-1
5	-4
6	-10



In competition, the cumulative effect of focus may be good...

Diminishing marginal utility

Hot Dogs Consumed	Utility from Each Hot Dog
1	+6
2	+2
3	0
4	-2
...	...
64	-40
65	-45
66	-50



Point where Joey Chestnut ties Kobayashi for the 2007 championship

Differential outcome

Hot Dogs Consumed	Utility from Each Hot Dog
1	0
2	-1
3	-2
...	...
63	-50
64	+5000
65	+10000
66	+1

Focus, enjoyment, and outcomes

Practice makes the game more fun to play because I know what I am doing.

Practice makes it more likely that I will win and I like winning.

Focused practice may result in increased utility due to

1. Improved activity **experience** due to accumulated skill (consumption capital)
2. Improved activity **outcome** due to cumulative experience (human production capital)





How important is
focus when
trying to achieve
mastery in some
area?



Focus and differential outcomes

Does musical talent exist?

Does athletic talent exist?



Obviously, Yes,
Right?

A contrary argument

A series of findings suggest that, assuming basic dexterity or height, talent is simply the result of accumulated hours of focused practice with appropriate feedback.

So, seriously...

Does musical talent exist?

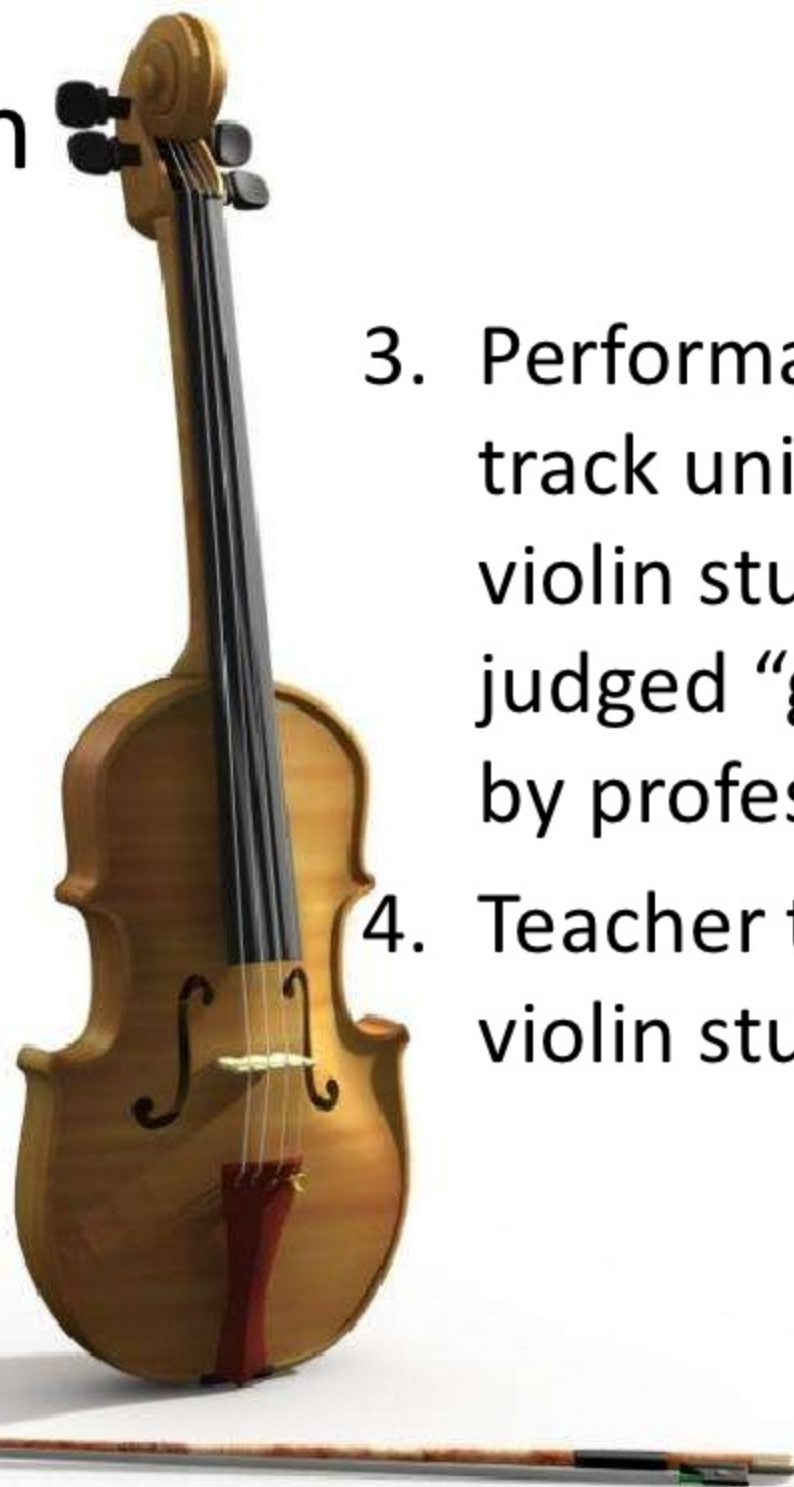
Does athletic talent exist?



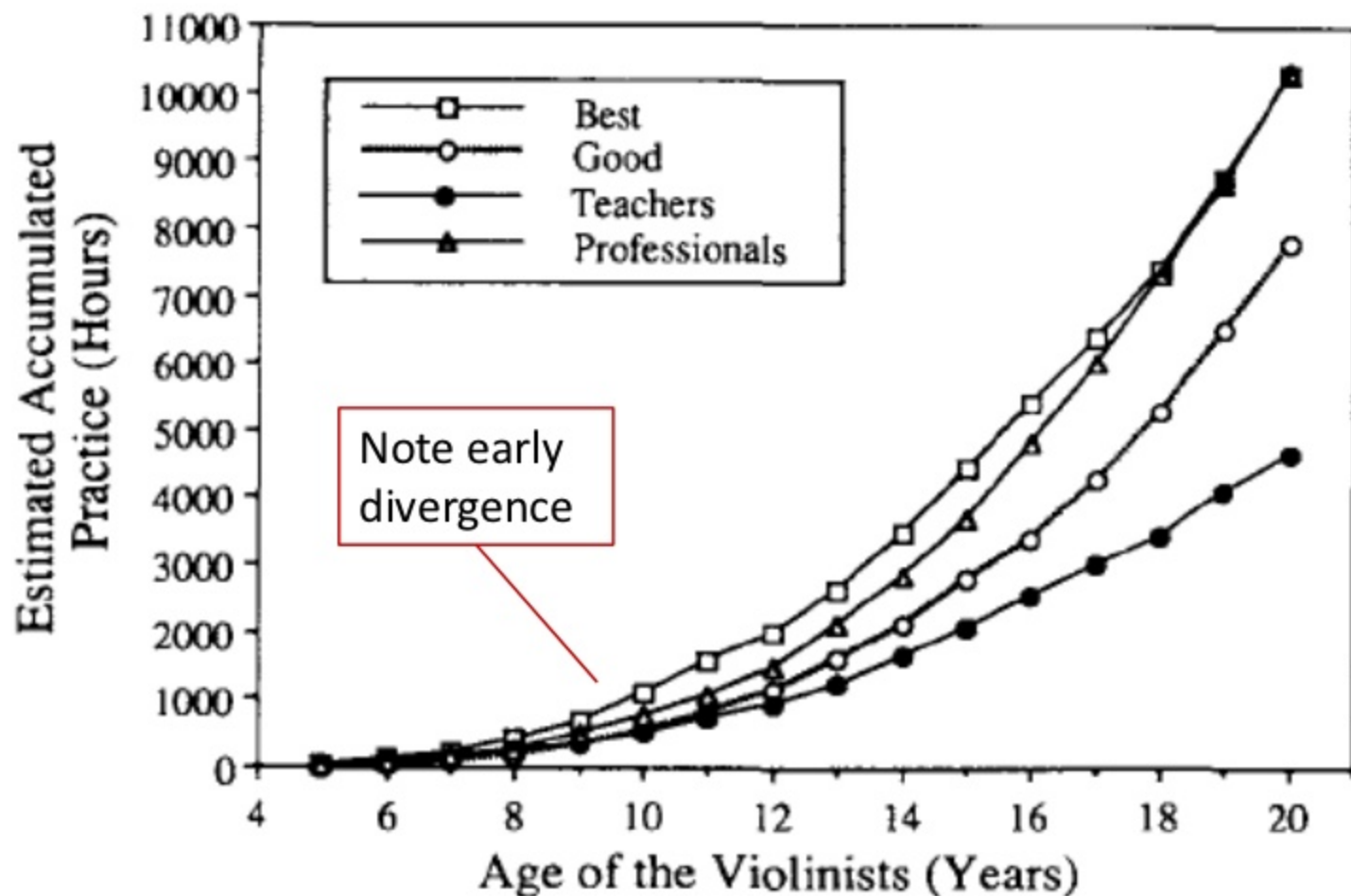
Talent on the violin

1. Professional performers
2. Performance track university violin students judged “best” by professors

3. Performance track university violin students judged “good” by professors
4. Teacher track violin students



Talent on the violin



Best/Good:

University violin students judged the best talent or good talent

Teachers:

Teacher-track violin students (not performers)

Professionals:

Professional violinists

Can you find the talented violinists with fewer hours of practice?

Adult piano players with 5-20+ years of
experience

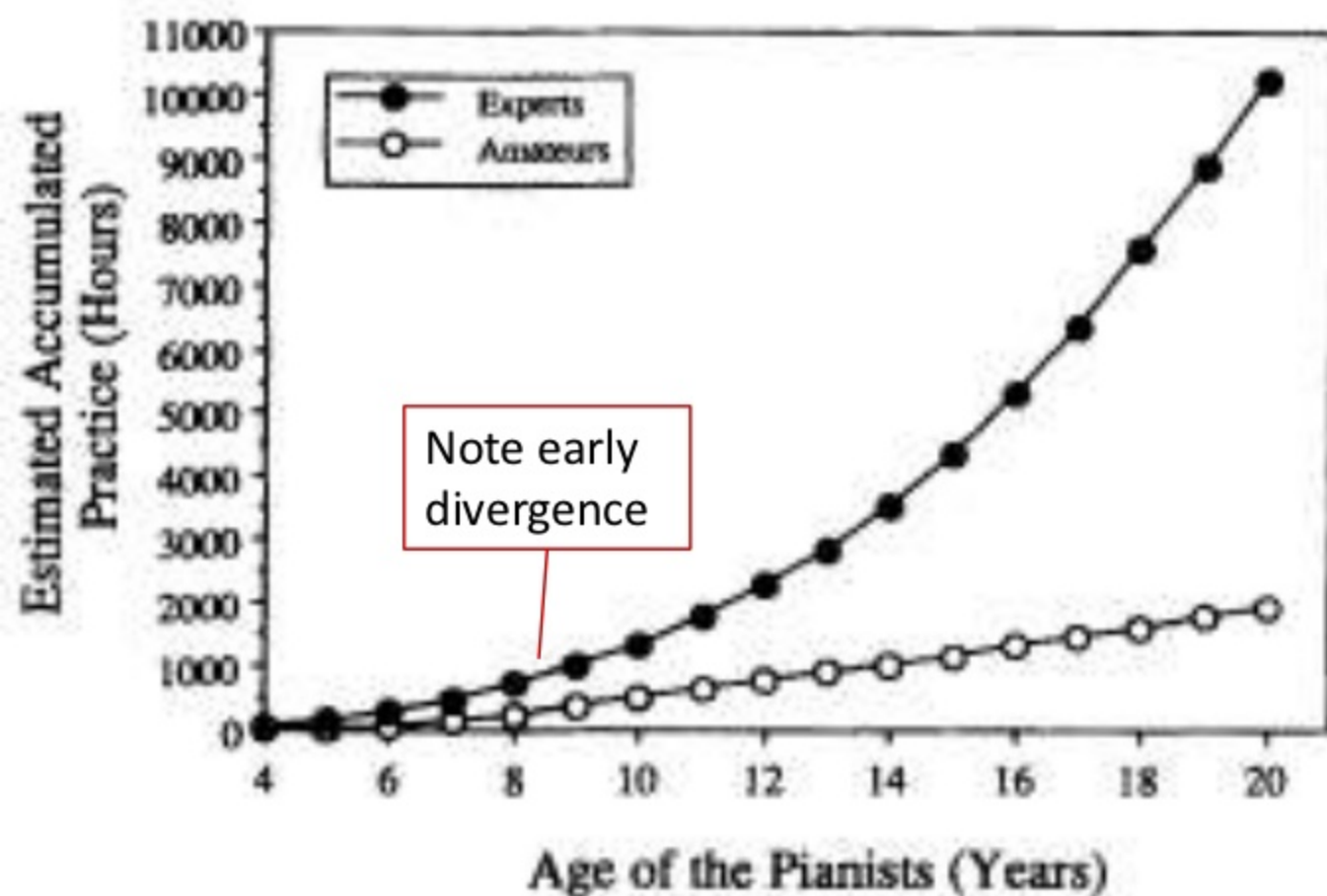


Expert Level Ability

v.

Amateur Level Ability

Talent on the piano



A retrospective study of expert-level and amateur-level adult piano players with 5-20+ years of practice.

Does “talent” seem to be related to hours of practice?

Innate differences of piano experts?

- There were no differences in general cognitive-motor skills.
- But, there were differences in specific abilities including single-hand movements, mirror-image movements in both hands, and different movements in opposite hands.



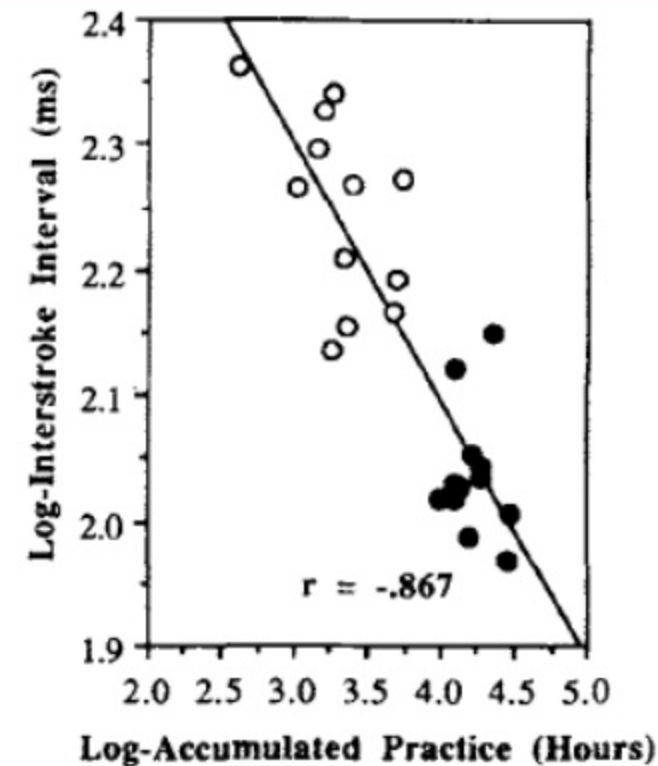
Innate differences of piano experts?

Were these specific hand skills

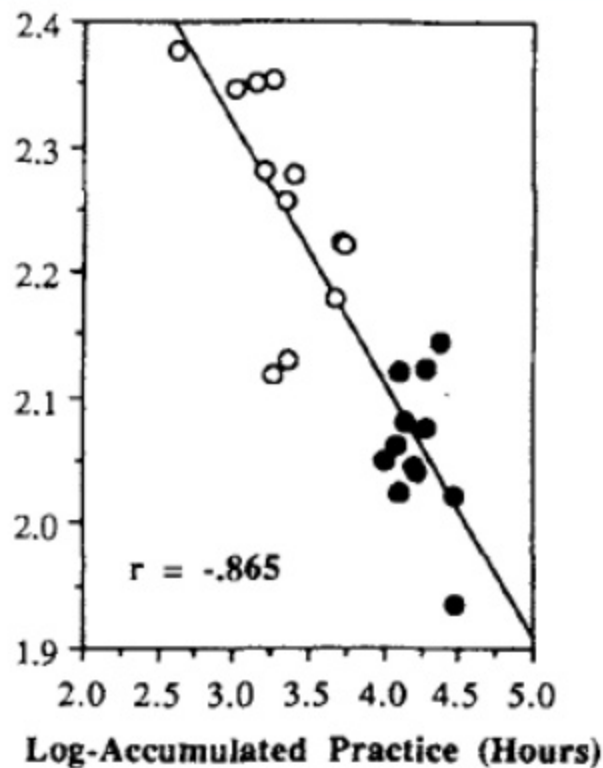
- a) An example of innate talent?
- b) Simply a reflection of accumulated hours of practice?



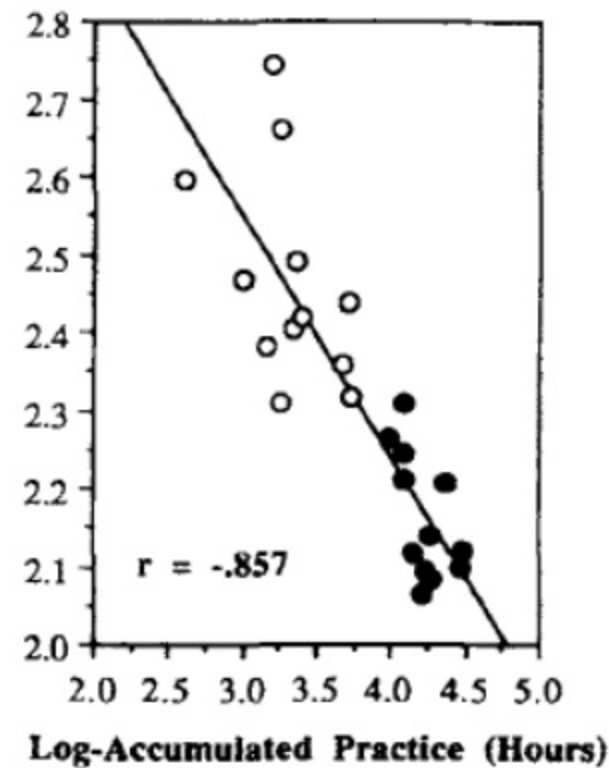
Core physical ability differences reflect accumulated practice



Single Hands




Mirror Image Movements



Different Movements

Experts are dark circles. Amateurs are empty circles.



Study of Belgian soccer players.
All about 25 years old.
All playing since they were about 5.
Now some play in
local competitions ("provincial"),
some in national competitions,
some in international competitions.

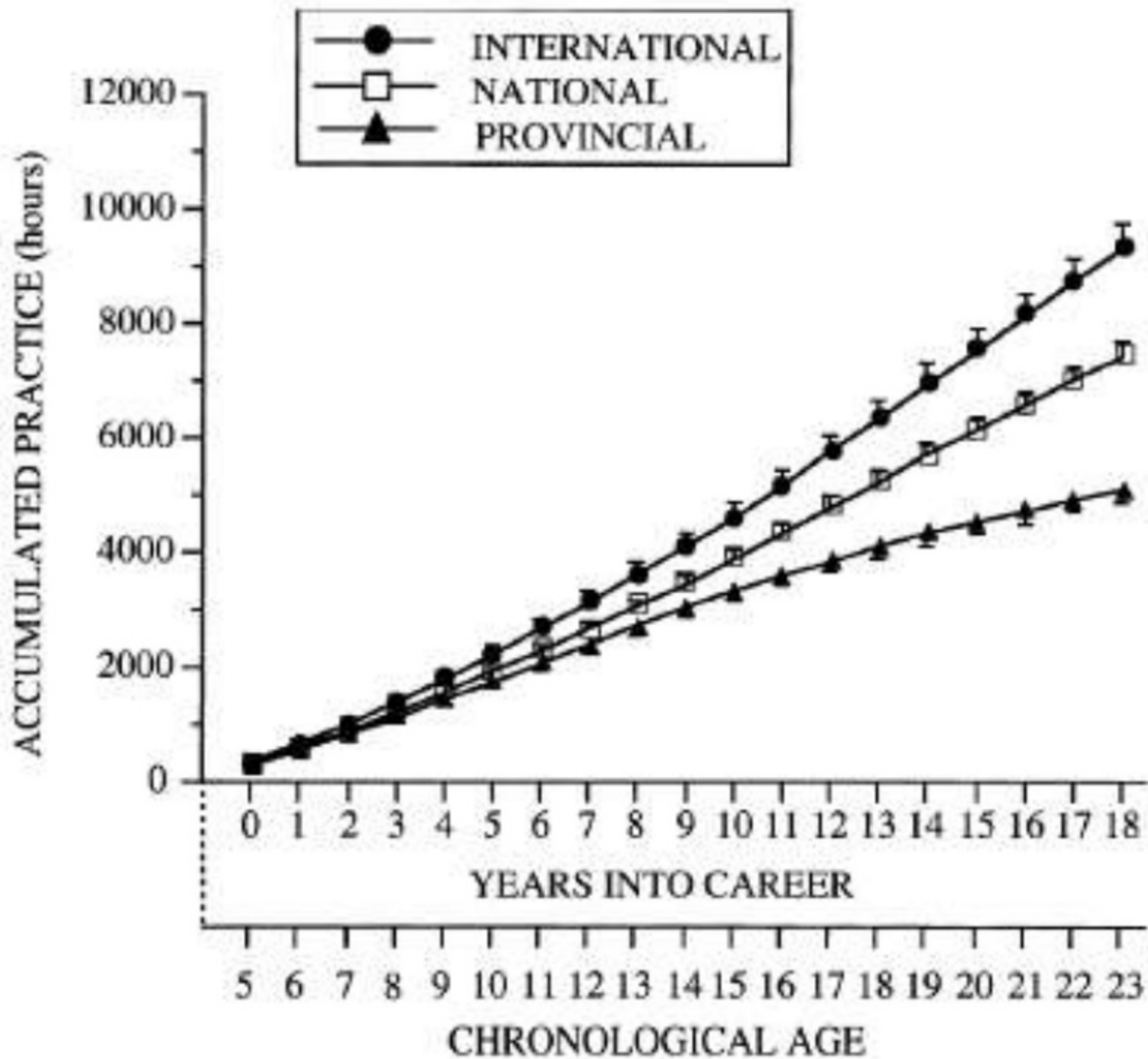
Any difference?

Expertise in soccer

3 groups, all playing in Belgian soccer leagues.

All about 25 years old.

All started playing at about age 5

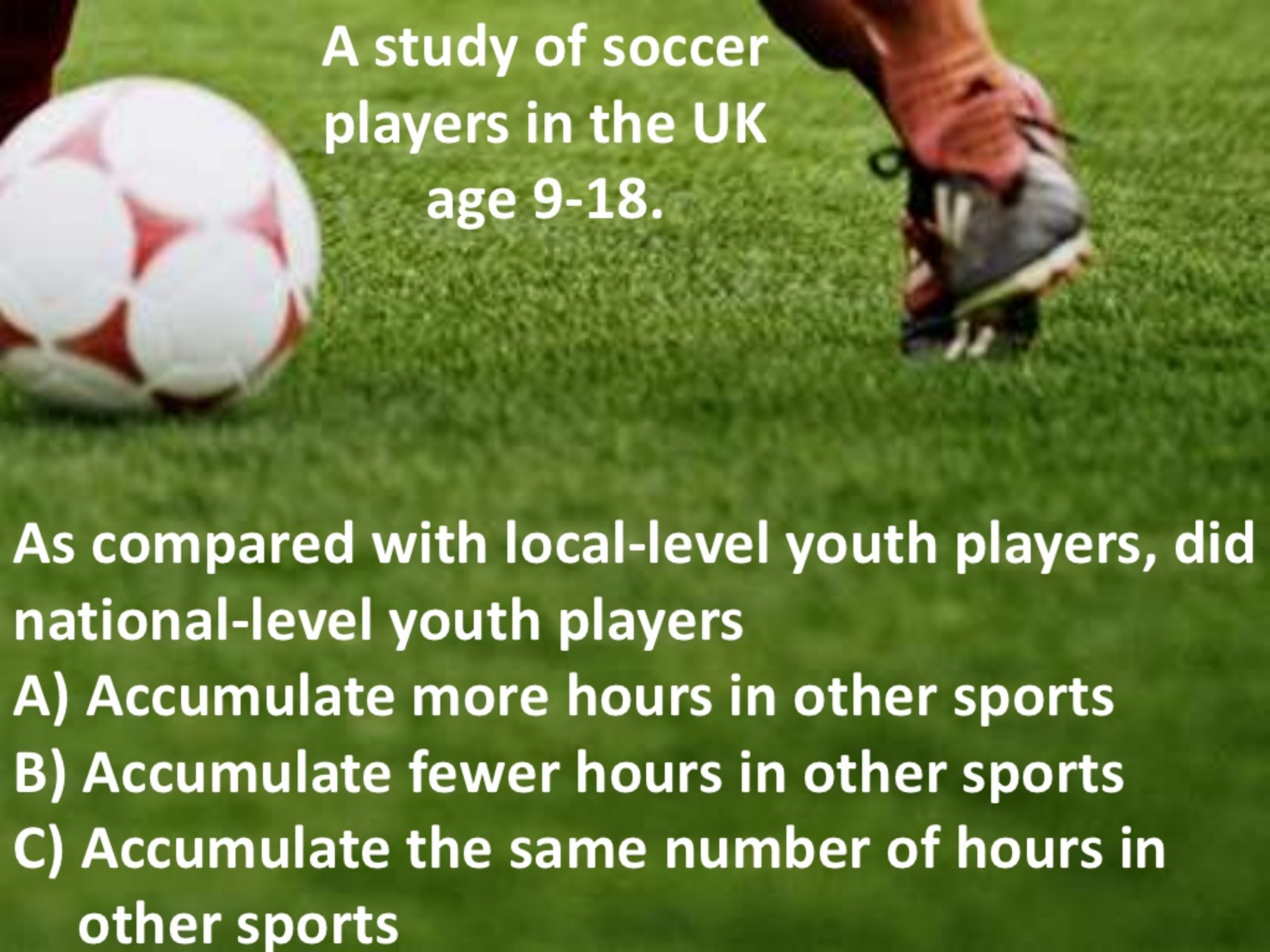


Helsen, et al. (2000), The roles of talent, physical precocity, and practice in the development of soccer expertise, *Journal of Sports Science*, 18, 727-736

A study of
soccer
players in
the UK age
9-18.

Differences
between national-
level players and
local-level players
in playing **OTHER
SPORTS.**



A close-up photograph of a soccer player's foot in a black and white cleated shoe, positioned to kick a white soccer ball with red star-shaped patterns. The scene is set on a green grass field.

**A study of soccer
players in the UK
age 9-18.**

**As compared with local-level youth players, did
national-level youth players**

- A) Accumulate more hours in other sports**
- B) Accumulate fewer hours in other sports**
- C) Accumulate the same number of hours in
other sports**