

The same is not true for, say, a mammographer. When a doctor reads a mammogram, she doesn't know for certain if there is breast cancer or not. She will be able to know only weeks later, from a biopsy, or years later, when no cancer develops. Without meaningful feedback, a doctor's ability actually deteriorates over time. Ericsson suggests a new mode of training. "Imagine a situation where a doctor could diagnose mammograms from old cases and immediately get feedback of the correct diagnosis for each case," he says. "Working in such a learning environment, a doctor might see more different cancers in one day than in a couple of years of normal practice."

If nothing else, the insights of Ericsson and his Expert Performance compatriots can explain the riddle of why so many elite soccer players are born early in the year.

Since youth sports are organized by age bracket, teams inevitably have a cutoff birth date. In the European youth soccer leagues, the cutoff date is Dec. 31. So when a coach is assessing two players in the same age bracket, one who happened to have been born in January and the other in December, the player born in January is likely to be bigger, stronger, more mature. Guess which player the coach is more likely to pick? He may be mistaking maturity for ability, but he is making his selection nonetheless. And once chosen, those January-born players are the ones who, year after year, receive the training, the deliberate practice and the feedback — to say nothing of the accompanying self-esteem — that will turn them into elites.

This may be bad news if you are a rabid soccer mom or dad whose child was born in the wrong month. But keep practicing: a child conceived on this Sunday in early May would probably be born by next February, giving you a considerably better chance of watching the 2030 World Cup from the family section.

Stephen J. Dubner and Steven D. Levitt are the authors of "Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Explores the Hidden Side of Everything." More information on the research behind this column is at www.freakonomics.com.

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