

In the news

BORN TO RUN? A DNA TEST TO IDENTIFY FUTURE SPORTS STARS

The latest personal DNA test to hit the US market, from Atlas Sports Genetics in Colorado, promises to “determine if a child would be best at speed and power sports such as football or sprinting, or endurance sports such as running” (*Daily Mail* 1 Dec 2008).

The test looks at the actinin alpha 3 gene (*ACTN3*). In a 2003 study all of the sprint athletes assessed had at least one copy of the R allele and 50% of them had two copies, suggesting that people with the R variant are more suited to speed and power sports. The company highlights “the value of the test for children under eight years old as more traditional physical assessments at that age are unreliable indicators of future talents” (*Sydney Morning Herald* 8 Dec 2008).

However, experts are sceptical about the value of the information this test provides. Among them is Theodore Friedmann, from the University of California–San Diego, who calls it “an opportunity to sell new versions of snake oil.” Some are worried that the test might encourage parents to “push their children too hard and obsessively”; the flip side is given by the company, who argue that their service would “help children from being forced into inappropriate sports” (*Telegraph* 7 Dec 2008).

Nevertheless, the experts are not the target audience. So will this test prove to be a popular choice for America’s parents? Some are fans of the idea — “I think it would prevent a lot of parental frustration” — and for others the pressure of not knowing might be too much to bear: “curiosity would send people over the edge. What if my son could be a pro football player and I don’t know it?” (*New York Times* 28 Nov 2008).

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