

Benefits of Multi-Sport Athletes vs. Sport Specialization

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Abstract

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This paper examines the benefits of multi-sport athletics versus sport specialization. The benefits of participating in more than one sport include different methods of training, attention of college recruiters, improved health and wellness, character development, improved athleticism, and an exposure to a variety of philosophical coaching methods. This all outweighs the effects of sport specialization including burnout, overuse injuries, and the opportunity for athletes to find their best sport. There is a need to consciously support and encourage multi-sport athletic participation in all elementary, middle, and high schools and it starts with parents and coaches.

In this new age of athletics and the pressure to be an elite player within a particular sport at such a young age, many athletes are beginning to play only one sport for a majority of their childhood into their high school athletic careers (Hastings, 2012). However, different methods of training, attention of college recruiters, improved health and wellness, character development, improved athleticism, and an exposure to a variety of philosophical coaching methods are some of the benefits for athletes who choose to play more than one sport (Shomper, 2011).

There are many negative aspects surrounding athletes who choose to participate in only one sport including burnout, overuse injuries, diminished talent pool in schools, and specialization, which denies some students the ability to discover their best sport (Gould, 2004). Children should have the ability to identify what they want to do on their own and determine what appeals to them without the guidance of organized sport at an early age. They should be participating in as many groups, teams, events, games, and non-organized club activities as they can, and they will benefit from those opportunities to mold what kind of athlete they want to be.

Since the popularity of athletics has risen quite rapidly in the past decade (Gould, 2004), the race to create the perfect athlete is in high demand (Epstein, 2013; McClusky, 2014). Many parents are forcing their children to specialize in one sport at a young age (Smoll & Smith, 1996). Gone are the times of just 'playing in the backyard'. Today, athletes often go from organized play, to individual training sessions, to travel leagues, to the school play, and back to some league play. This repetitive amount of stress on the psychological and physical aspects of athletics has caused many cases of burnout and injury (Gould, 2010).

Injuries related to overuse are a major concern for younger athletes. Participating in the same sport year round stresses the same movements on bones, joints, and muscles. Overuse injuries account for 50% of all injuries in middle and high school athletes and overtraining is the result of stress and strain on the body in a negative manner (Mason, 2013). Psychological problems that occur during specialization include loss of interest, decreased focus, and elevated depression caused by stress that comes with the day-to-day commitment. These areas of concern are real with youth sports today and the demand to specialize at a young age.

The real question is, what is sport specialization? Sport specialization is defined as an approach to athletic development that emphasizes focused training in a single sport on a year-round basis (Bodey, 2013). The opposite of sport specialization is sport diversification. Sport diversification is an alternative approach in athletic development where athletes are exposed to a generalized training regimen in which they "sample" a variety of sports (Bodey, 2013). Sport involvement focuses on fun, enjoyment, and competence, which contributes to intrinsic motivation and persistence which are essential for sport expertise and the ability to compete at a high level (Wood, 2011). A study and policy statement from the American Academy of Pediatrics (Committee on Sports Medicine and Fitness, 2000) concluded that youth should be discouraged from specialization in a single sport before adolescence to avoid physical and psychological damage.

There are many reasons that can be attributed to the push for sport specialization. Parents play an

important role in promoting specialization. Parents apply pressure on children to specialize by providing certain financial benefits including camps, private lessons, clinics, and by developing special facilities for a certain sport in the home (Hecimovich, 2004). Coaches also convince athletes that sport specialization is necessary for year-round training in a sport and is needed to attract collegiate athletic scholarships and to win high school state championships (Shomper, 2011). Communities and high schools also traditionally support some school sport programs over others, which can push athletes to sway one way or another. With the pressure to specialize in sport, there are many disadvantages to specialization and advantages to being a multi-sport athlete.

Early exposure to a variety of activities is more beneficial than prematurely pushing a child to learn a particular skill or specialize in one sport before he or she is developmentally ready to commit and compete to that sport (Smith, 1996). The major concerns of the physical/physiological realm of sport specialization include the musculoskeletal make-up, nutrition, and sexual maturation of athletes. The musculoskeletal system can break down due to stress and overtraining of tissues, and potentially cause major injury (Hecimovich, 2004). For some sports, such as wrestling, gymnastics, and distance running, nutrition is a huge issue due to the pressure for athletes to maintain a lean and muscular body shape. Also, the effect of stress and poor nutrition has a negative impact on the maturation of the body and has an influence on puberty (Brenner, 2007).

Along with negative physical factors of sport specialization, there are many psychological factors that have an impact on athletes as well. When athletes are forced to self-select and specialize in a sport, there is more stress to succeed, more time to practice and compete, and less time for freedom outside of sports. Sport specialization requires year round dedication with a lot of time commitment to that one sport. Sport psychologists have determined that a lack of fun and enjoyment is the number one reason that most youth leave organized sport (Smith, 1996). Those children who tend to leave sports at an early age due to burnout or not having fun with that sport are more likely to lead a lifestyle that is sedentary into adulthood (Hecimovich, 2004).

Playing the same sport every day for long periods of time, no matter how much one loves it, is a recipe for mental fatigue and burnout (Clemens, 2011). Different methods of training, attention of college recruiters, improved health and wellness, character development, improved athleticism, and a variety of philosophical coaching methods are some of the benefits for athletes who choose to play more than one sport. It is very important to remember that young athletes take the field, court, and rink because they love the game, enjoy playing with their friends, and love the thrill of competition, and too many youngsters are getting robbed of this due to the ego of coaches and or parents (Wood, 2011).

One major reason why athletes decide to specialize is the belief that specialization will increase their chances of receiving an athletic scholarship (Shomper, 2011). Athletes think they will develop their skills in that sport because of the increased practice time and more opportunities to compete (Shomper, 2011). One of the main comments heard about athletes deciding to play one sport is to reduce the risk of injury from another sport, which is often not true because of the chance of overtraining on certain tissues in your body with sport specialization (Hecimovich, 2004). Many college coaches prefer to recruit multi-sport athletes for a lot of reasons. One reason is the fact athletes are not burned out from the one sport they have been playing year around for several years; they are ready to go and are more adaptable, and less concerned with being a 'star' (Shomper, 2011). The first question that recruiters are beginning to ask teachers and coaches is, "Do they play another sport?" (Harlan, 2013).

There are many great athletes who were multi-sport athletes at the high school level; for example, Ha-keem Olajuwon, Babe Didrikson, John Elway, and, LeBron James, (Shomper, 2011). With most of the multi-million dollar athletes being multi-sport athletes while in high school, it is hard to argue in support of sport

specialization. One reason why these multi-sport athletes are successful is due to the variety of experiences they were exposed to in all the athletic events in which they participated. They were able to have a new perspective on competition and develop more skills than that of a person who specialized (Clemens, 2011). The different equipment, skills, rules, and approaches of each game make each sport uniquely fun in developing better all-around athletes.

One example of an athlete who stands out as a true multi-sport athlete who has dominated at all levels is current Minnesota Twin, Joe Mauer. Mauer played three sports in high school and is the only high school athlete to be named ALL-USA Player of the Year in two sports (Halley, 2012). Prior to being the number one pick in the MLB draft, he was a standout multi-sport athlete for Cretin-Derham Hall High School, MN. Jim O'Neill, Mauer's baseball coach in high school said, "He was like Peyton Manning and a quarterback who really understands the game, and also it would have been interesting to see what he could have done in the NFL" (Halley, 2012, p. 2). Mauer had a full-scholarship offer to many major division one programs, ultimately choosing the path to play baseball at the professional level. Mauer believes that specialization is detrimental to our youth in athletics, "I think kids are specializing way too soon, playing basketball and football really helped me in baseball, doing different movements and seeing different situations helped out" (Halley, 2012, p. 3). He also thinks one should not specialize until college, stating, "It would be difficult to do baseball and football at a major division one program (Florida State), but as far as high school, I played three sports and it seemed to work out pretty good" (Halley, 2012, p. 3). Mauer is a great role model for all athletes to emulate when deciding to be a multi-sport athlete and reap great rewards in doing so.

In summary, there is much evidence and research that details the negative effects of specialization at a young age (Baker, 2003; Baker, Cogley, Fraser-Thomas, 2009; Brenner 2007; Capranica, & Millard-Stafford, 2011; Hecimovich, 2004; Gould, 2010; Malina, 2010). These negative aspects are overuse and stress related injuries, burnout, and loss of transferable athletic skills that other sports may be able to develop. Youth and their guardians are also worried about getting injured outside of their preferred sport, but the reality is one can get hurt walking down the stairs. There are so many benefits to being a multi-sport athlete that outweigh the option of specialization throughout one's high school career. The need for parents, coaches, athletes, and administrators to be knowledgeable about the benefits of multi-sport participation is essential for the development of well-rounded athletes.

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