
Sport Specialization: Causes and Concerns

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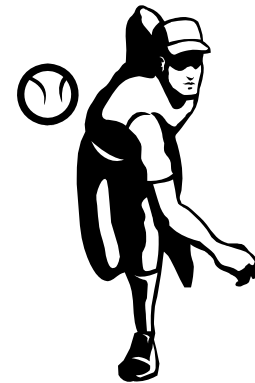
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Sport Specialization: Important Questions

- 1. Is there a trend toward increasing sport specialization among young athletes?
 - 2. Why do young athletes specialize in one sport?
 - 3. Is early specialization or multi-sport participation more beneficial for young athletes?
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Definition

- Athletes limiting their athletic participation to one sport which is practiced, trained for, and competed in throughout the year (Hill, 1987).



Trend

- Surveys of coaches and athletic directors, conducted over the past 25 years have consistently revealed a perception that specialization in youth sports is increasing.
 - Self report data from athletes has also shown increased specialization in some sports.
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Theories Regarding the Increase of Sport Specialization

- 1. Societal trend
 - Progressive loss of freedom in exchange for increased excellence and precision (Novak).
 - Emphasis on record setting and quantitative assessments (Guttman)
- 2. Parents
- 3. Coaches
- 4. Early peak age of some sports
- 5. Communities (Sutton)
- 6. Ethnicity
- 7. Weather/geography
- 8. Socioeconomic factors
- 9. Sport Commercialization
- 10. Early recruiting
- 11. Sport clubs and recreational sport programs



Arguments for Sport Specialization

- Might increase chances for college scholarship
- Develops refined skills because of increased practice time.
- Needed in order to keep up with others.
- Satisfies a desire to achieve excellence.
- A means of helping a marginal player make a varsity team
- A means to avoid an injury in another sport.
- Various body types are suited for particular sports.
- **Basic philosophy: Start early – narrow focus**



Arguments Against Sport Specialization

- Overuse injuries (DiFiori)
- Psychological burnout (Gould)
- Unidimensional self-concept (Coakley)
- Dilutes talent pools in schools (creates friction).
- Denies athletes meaningful contacts with other coaches and athletes.
- Denies athletes transferable skills
- May result in athlete missing their best sport
- May pit athletes vs. coaches
- May result in frustration and disillusionment since low percentage achieve elite status.



Arguments for Sport Diversification

- Development of multiple identities
- Cushion against failure
- Reduced chance of overuse injuries
- Positive skill transfer
- Sports sampling provides more options for later sport activity (Cote, 2009)
- Positive values
- Reduced Stress
- Fun



Research Findings

- 1. Some female sports have early peak ages (e.g., gymnastics, diving).
- 2. Children are more susceptible to overtraining than adults.
- 3. No evidence to support theory that fine motor skills must be mastered prior to puberty.



Overuse injuries

- 1. Overtraining - fatigue
 - 2. Muscle overuse - injury
 - 3. Chronic injuries (tennis elbow, swimmer's arm, stress fractures)
 - 4. Negative effects on parasympathetic and sympathetic processes (The actions of the parasympathetic nervous system can be summarized as "rest and digest" , as opposed to the "fight-or-flight" effects of the sympathetic nervous system).
 - 5. Compartment syndrome (repetitive and extensive muscle use, inflammation), impaired blood supply. May require surgery, may lead to nerve damage and muscle death).
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Burnout

- 1. Pre- competitive anxiety.
 - 2. Intense pressure to win.
 - 3. High expectations from adults.
 - 4. Time constraints
 - 5. Lack of social life
 - 6. Feeling of a lack of control over one's life
 - 7. Depression
 - 8. Eating disorders
 - 9. Chronic fatigue
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Research Findings

- **Swedish tennis study** (Carlson, 1988). Diversified lifestyles associated with persistence in primary sport.
- **Russian swimming study** (Barynina & Vaitsekhovskii, 1989) - earlier specialization resulted in shorter time on national team and overall swimming career).
- **Rookie League Baseball players** (Hill, 1993). Most played several sports during high school.
- **High School swimmers** (Raedeke, 1997). Swimmers whose primary reason for swimming shifted from enjoyment to entrapment experienced higher burnout.
- **High school athletic study (Wahl, 1998)**. Decreased participation in h.s. football because of increased specialization – 38 states.
- **Club sports (Watts, 1999)**. Pressure on high school swimmers and soccer players to participate year around in non-school club sports (1000 surveyed).
- **Junior tennis and handball players**. (Nikolaidou, 2006). Specialization had an impact on the relationships between isokinetic, isometric and dynamic measures of elbow strength.



Analysis of the Frequency of Sport Participation and Sport Specialization

- Strand & Zimney (2005).
 - Purpose : To determine frequency of Sport Specialization during 1-12th grades.
 - Instrument: Sport Specialization Survey
 - Participants: 566 college students
 - Findings:
 - - Participants from larger communities and schools more likely to specialize.
 - - 25 percent of those who specialized, started during grades 1-6.
 - - 22 percent of those who specialized prior to high school dropped all athletic participation by high school.
 - - Highest percentage of specialization initiated in grades 9 & 10.
 - - Both boys and girls specialized more in team sports than in individual sports.
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Is Youth Sport Specialization Necessary for Future Collegiate Participation?

- Pantuosco-Hensch (2006)
 - 469 student athletes from 4 New England colleges
 - Youth Sport Participation Questionnaire and follow-up interviews.
 - Average age of sport specialization initiation (15.5 yrs).
 - Both males and females specialized more in individual sports than team sports.
 - Perception that sport specialization was not necessary for collegiate participation for them and, in general.
 - They were critical of specialization practices.
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Ways to Promote Diversification

- 1. Encourage young athletes to develop diversified lifestyles.
- 2. Honor multi-sport athletes.
- 3. Promote diversification in athletic policy handbooks.
- 4. Educate parents.
- 5. No-cut policies in athletic programs.
- 6. Clearly differentiated school sport seasons.
- 7. Offer youth Multi-sport camps.
- 8. Lobby school districts to hire elementary physical education specialists.



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QUESTIONS?

