



## Youth sports – The Case against Early Specialization – a three part series

### Part 3 of a 3 part series

### Return to the Sandlot – One Small City’s Approach to Youth Sports

By Della Lowe

The Leisure Services Department of the City of St. George, Utah provides a myriad of opportunities for its citizens to participate in the Arts, outdoor activities, sports and continuing educational programs. Indeed, its mission statement is not just an empty statement but a true commitment to the residents, “We provide services that focus on people and advance a thriving community.” Its Youth Sports Programs fall into this mix of services and the department is constantly striving to understand the newest research and trends so that it can be innovative and nimble in providing the best experience for its young participants.

Steve Bingham, Manager of Recreation, remarked that the motto of the Youth Sports Program is “get out and Play. “I feel strongly about what we are losing as Americans today. Kids are playing less outside with so many distractions and so many demands on their time. In many cases, because of budget cuts, they are not even growing up with PE in school.” Bingham says that if children learn early to be active, that will translate perfectly into adult sports and a lifelong habit of physical activity.

Bingham feels there is an important role for recreational sports as opposed to competitive sports. “We try to offer that backyard play that kids are missing and we try to do it in a way that takes parents out of the equation, which lets the children experiment, have fun and go at their own pace without parental pressure.

The Youth Sports Programs are designed to be affordable, which allows children from all economic circumstances to participate and the scope is ambitious. It is planned, however, to avoid the same pitfalls of early specialization discussed in the earlier articles in this series. The City provides opportunities throughout the year for children to participate in flag football, volleyball, rugby, basketball, soccer, baseball and softball, some divided by gender, some by age and some by ability. “We feel it is important



for children to try a lot of different things and not to be so sport specific at a young age,” said Bingham. He notes that research is showing, as referenced in the earlier articles, that kids are playing so hard that it causes injuries and often burnout by the time they are in high school.

What is more concerning to Bingham is the fact that kids will burn out on one sport to the extent that they do not wish to participate in any sport in high school or college and that effectively ends their outdoor play and exercise. “If they get to try a lot of things which recreational play offers, then maybe some of that will translate into a habit, a gym membership as an adult, a routine of exercise.

“In sports, second place is the first loser,” remarked Chuck Hammer, Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Utah High School Activities Association. “But if you work your tail off and do whatever you can, you learn your greatest lessons from failing, not winning. I believe you are a better person when all is said and done.”

A [Changing the Game Project](#) article, notes that in a study of 1200 youth athletes, Dr. Neeru Jayanthi of Loyola University found that early specialization in a single sport is one of the strongest predictors of injury. Athletes in the study who specialized were 70% to 93% more likely to be injured than children who played multiple sports. Another research point in the same article finds, “that early participation in multiple sports leads to better overall motor and athletic development, longer playing careers, increased ability to transfer sports skills to other sports and increased motivation, ownership of the sports experience, and confidence.”

According to the staff at the Youth Sports Program in St. George, sports specialization is not vital at a young age, before 15 to 18 years old, to be successful in high school or college. Part of becoming a good athlete is getting touches on the ball – any ball. Hand eye coordination,



strength, height, etc. are all the factors that go into a good athlete. Speed and power develop at different rates throughout people’s lives.

“Even at a much older age there are people who can just move into these sports because they have a certain amount of natural athleticism, a certain amount of

physical fitness and then they get motivated because they find they enjoy something and they become good at it,” said Bingham.

One example he cited was the football player Ezekiel "Ziggy" Ansah, defensive end for the Detroit Tigers. Ziggy is from Ghana and played soccer there. He was an enthusiastic basketball player and did track and field. Bingham's point is that he developed all his muscle groups and wound up as a first round draft pick for the NFL. "I am not suggesting that by doing this your child will become the next Ziggy. What I am suggesting is that your child needs to explore, find what he is really good at but also find what he really enjoys."

### **Changing the Way Teams Are Formed**

Again from the [Changing the Game Project](#), "Early specialization ignores the importance of deliberate play/free play. Researchers found that activities which are intrinsically motivating, maximize fun and provide enjoyment are incredibly important. These are termed deliberate play (as opposed to deliberate practice, which are activities motivated by the goal of performance enhancement and not enjoyment). Deliberate play increases motor skills, emotional ability, and creativity. Children allowed deliberate play also tend spend more time engaged in a sport than athletes in structured training with a coach." The article points to research which says that participating in multiple sports offers:

- **Better Overall Skills and Ability:** Research shows that early participation in multiple sports leads to better overall motor and athletic development, longer playing careers, increased ability to transfer sports skills other sports and increased motivation, ownership of the sports experience, and confidence.
- **Smarter, More Creative Players:** Multi-sport participation at the youngest ages yields better decision making and pattern recognition, as well as increased creativity. These are all qualities that coaches of high level teams look for.
- **Most College Athletes Come From a Multi-Sport Background:** A 2013 American Medical Society for Sports Medicine survey found that 88% of college athletes surveyed participated in more than one sport as a child

Bingham emphasizes, "My passion for fitness has led me to this job, but we definitely have a larger agenda. We feel it is important to keep up with trends and research – both physical and psychological - and to be innovative. Inclusiveness is important since all young people, no matter what their ability, benefit from physical activity and variety."

The St. George Recreation Youth Programs do not necessarily compose teams by age or school grade. Because it strives to include all children, able bodied, physically challenged,

emotionally or mentally challenged, the staff stresses age-appropriate activities based on where the child really is. This avoids pushing children out who may be, for example, of an age to be in the eighth grade, but are not physically or mentally able to compete with children at that level. The child is then put into a group where she can feel successful.

“I have found that parents and kids are very happy if things are organized and structured, and that makes a good program. That way parents can just show up and enjoy and the kids can play freely,” remarked Bingham

The programs try to find ways to add value without adding cost, because, again, inclusiveness is the goal without regard to demographic and income status. The staff has done that by soliciting sponsors for T-shirts, trophies etc. The students can wear the shirts for school and it makes them feel proud to show that they are participating.

Bingham says that people’s hand eye coordination, strength, height and mental maturity, speed and power all feed into becoming a good athlete and develop at different rates throughout their lives. “As I have spent my last 20 years coaching baseball for example, my observation is three or four of the five starters do not even make the team. Does that mean they cannot be good athletes? Not at all. It means they may not be developed enough in all those factors that go into making a good athlete.”

Bingham noted that we do not have children majoring in an academic subject at 9 or 11 or 12 because they have too many things to explore. The mind is still growing and children cannot make those decisions at a very young age. It is the same with sports.

The programs provided for Youth Sports are not just about recreation only. “We try to serve a broad range of capabilities while maintaining a balanced sports participation that is both age and ability appropriate,” he said. To do that, the group is exploring several new initiatives.

- Breaking programs up into age groups of six month instead of a full year
- Offering some ongoing clinics to respond to a need for some more intensive instruction



“At the end of the day, we want our programs to serve the greater good and encompass what the community need is, while serving ‘the one’,” said Bingham. “By creating smaller teams we give children more individual instruction, more touches on the ball, simplify the games and give each child more play. We are not trying to cater to one range of capabilities or one demographic but rather providing children with a way to improve in a sport without encouraging year round specialization.”

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