

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

Part 1 of a Three Part Series

by Della Lowe

Chasing the Scholarship and the Professional Career – Are Parents Robbing Children of Childhood

In the last few decades there has been an increase in sports specialization at younger and younger ages as well as the pressure put on young athletes to play year round. This series of articles will begin to explore the financial, physical and emotional ramifications of this trend and provide some context for parents (and coaches) to delve into recent research on the subject to help young athletes make better choices, avoid injury, enjoy their childhood and become better people through athletics.

- If you heard that your child is a very talented athlete but he/she is not getting a college scholarship, would you be puzzled?
- If you accepted that, but were told that your child should participate in lots of different sports instead of specializing in the one he/she is best at, would you find that hard to understand?
- If you heard that the old adage, practice makes perfect, was not necessarily true, would you find it unbelievable?



After all, most of us have been told at one time or another in our lives the exact opposite of those statements. However, research in recent years has found a downside – both physical and psychological - to early specialization and year round play in youth sports. In an interesting article about the subject, titled, “[Hey parents, quit racing specialists and start raising omnivores](#)”, the author states, “While early specialization works for the lucky few and increasingly large wave of research has provided proof that early specialization doesn’t work so well for the rest of us.” He cites research that early specialization [increases the chance of injuries](#), creates [worse](#)

[overall athletes](#), makes kids less [likely to participate in sports as adults](#) and create a falsely high barrier to participation. Maybe it was the rise of parenting as a competitive sport. Maybe it was the ESPN-ification of youth sports, which lost its community base and morphed into a free-market bazaar of travel teams, trophies, and tournaments, with each kid (read: parent) seeking the holy grail of success: the college scholarship.”

And he is not alone in studying this research and raising an alarm. Below are just a few of the recent, headlines for articles which attempt to address the rising tide of early specialization in youth sports and its effects on the well-being of our children.

[“Study finds that parental spending on kid’s sports may be misguided”](#), [“In McLean, a crusade to get people to back off the parenting arms race”](#), [“How not to ruin a prodigy”](#), [“The race to nowhere in youth sports”](#).

There are many reasons why coaches and parents encourage children to specialize at a young age in a single sport – the child shows an aptitude, the coach is looking to keep his roster filled with the best players, parents see possible college scholarships or lucrative professional careers – and, indeed, some children do show an affinity for a particular sport. However, this series of articles explores the downside of that early specialization through some current research, interviews with some experts involved with youth sports, both competitive and recreational, and statistics on scholarships and professional careers as well as worsening injury rates among young athletes as well as young professionals.



Your Kid Isn’t Getting an Athletic Scholarship

Let us for now concentrate on the financial side of this equation. Even if your child is superb at the sport he/she chooses, the odds of him getting a college scholarship on the basis of that sport are very slim. According to statistics from the [University Interscholastic League](#), The percentage of high school athletes earning college athletic scholarships in any sport, is extremely low. Out of tens or hundreds of thousands of national participants, the number of athletes who manage to snag an athletic scholarship ranges from a high of 1.6% for girls golf or boys soccer to a low of .3% for boys wrestling.

I am sure the parents of gifted high school athletes had their best interests at heart, but when one considers the numbers above and the time, energy and money spent during early years when children should be both children and expanding their knowledge of the world at large, the question is, was it worth it and what happens when that child does not get a scholarship.

A 2014 headline in the Deseret News seemed to point out just how far club sports are going to increase their prestige: [High school boys basketball: Lone Peak traveling to Dubai to take part in elite hoops tournament](#). During an n interview with Craig Hammer, Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Utah High School Activities Association, his response was incredulous, “They are going to Dubai! You are a parent and you get sucked into that. I tell dads all the time. These traveling teams are the biggest waste of money on the planet. Maybe you’re fulfilling some dad’s dream but not the kids.”



Hammer feels the biggest battle right now is club sports, which have really changed how young people participate in sports. “In our district we do not travel outside of the state to play sports. We believe there has to be that balance. Ultimately athletics is a privilege it is not a right. “You are in school to get an education first and that athletics and the activities supplement that and support that if it is done right. It is not the other way around. It can’t be the other way around.”

Indeed another study from [University of Utah’s Families Sports Lab](#) and quoted in the Chicago Tribune, seemed to confirm Hammer’s conclusions. According to Travis Dorsch, an assistant professor in Utah State’s department of family, consumer and human development, the study found, “the more money folks are investing, the higher pressure kids are perceiving. More pressure means less enjoyment. As kids enjoy sports less, their motivation goes down. The indirect effect is.... spending more money less motivation,” The problem according to Dorsch is in the system. “Youth sports in the U.S. are not set up for participation’s sake or fitness or...fun, but to transform a young athlete into the best to make that elite team to reach the top of the pyramid.”

However, as evidenced by some of the earlier statistics here, the likelihood of even a very good athlete reaching that pinnacle is very slim. So why do parents and coaches push so hard. One answer may be found in a post titled, [The Race to Nowhere in Youth Sports](#) from the Changing the Game Project. It states in part that, “an adult driven, hyper competitive race to the top in both academics and athletics that serves the needs of the adults, but rarely the kids.” “We have a generation of children that have been pushed to achieve parental dreams instead of their own, and prodded to do more, more, more and better, better, better. The pressure and anxiety is stealing one thing our kids will never get back; their childhood.”

Justin Refearn, who runs a very successful girls track team in St. George, Utah called Quick Feet, commented, “The thing that I see that is concerning is that there is such an emphasis on winning that it is taking the fun out of the sport for the athlete. Parents and coaches are not allowing the athlete to be first. It is parents and coaches first. I believe that it is not helpful for athletes to do the same thing year round. Sometimes an athlete needs a separation from whatever sport they are doing. The constant pressure to go year round in my opinion leads to mental and physical burnout and a high number of injuries.”

Youth sports is a big, big business and according to studies noted by [ESPN](#), it is such a big business that often those who get to participate have parents who are well-heeled. According to a study by Don Sabo, a longtime youth-sports researcher and a professor at D'Youville College in Buffalo and noted in the article, the biggest indicator of whether kids start young is whether their parents have a household income of \$100,000 or more. The article states, “Nationwide, according to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, only a quarter of eighth to 12th-graders enrolled in the poorest schools played school sports. (Those are schools with the highest rate of free-lunch eligibility, which are also among the schools with the highest dropout rates, meaning that even lower percentages of the kids in those communities are playing.) This situation won't be helped as schools continue to cut back funds for teams. The percentage of high schools with no sports has already jumped from 8.2 percent during the 1999-2000 school year to 15.1 percent in 2009-10.”

So we return to the questions, is the money spent by parents trying to raise the next superstar worth it and will early specialization really help or does it prevent young athletes from developing as whole people? Ross Tucker of [The Science of Sport](#) has three recommendations:

Delay – wait as long as possible before choosing a single sport to pursue

Diversify – embrace all possibilities to broaden skills

Co-operate – seek ways to build connections between the silos of individual sports

Are we concentrating so much on raising professional athletes rather than looking at the role sports plays in developing and whole human being? Is the cost of participation so high that only the wealthy can get the benefits sports brings? The next article in this series, will explore these points as well as the rise of injuries among young people and what youth sports brings to the life of an athlete besides fitness.

###