

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

Part 2 of a 3 part series

Why Are Youth Sports Injuries Skyrocketing

by Della Lowe

Youth sports provides many benefits to children – better physical health, a sense of emotional wellbeing, a sense of achievement and learning how to get along with others. There are, however, drawbacks to forcing young children to specialize in one sport or play year round.

In the first article of this series, I discussed the challenge of letting parents and coaches drive young athletes too hard, banking on the promise of either a college scholarship or a professional career. In this article, I will look at the mounting concern that early specialization not only doesn't lead to better performance but also can lead to more serious injuries and burnout by young sportsmen.

An article from the Wall Street Journal, titled [How Not to Ruin a Prodigy](#), and commented on in The Gifted Exchange, quotes Todd Schmitz, Olympic swimming coach for Missy Franklin saying, "Getting to be world class in any field takes a ton of work and practice. But if it isn't fun,



then it's hard to stick with a rigorous schedule year after year after year. A coach who insisted on making her swim when she did not want to might have squelched the joy that these days has her getting faster and faster. How to nurture that joy is a question that all adults who work with talented young people need to ask."

I think most of us can agree that what is fun, we stick with and what is not, we don't. However, society seems to have put such a premium on winning that parents and coaches appear to be serving their own agenda and not their child's. That pressure, often combined with a child's love of a particular sport appears to have resulted in a rise of both burnout and injury in young players.

Steve Bingham, Manager of [Recreational Services](#) in Saint George Utah, notes, “What is the first question you ask your child when they come home from a game. It is probably - did you win? Not a bad question, but perhaps the wrong message. If your child believes that winning is the only reason to play, you could be ruining sports for your kids.” Bingham adds that the first questions should be, did you have fun, did you try your best.

In an article posted on the [Changing the Game Project](#), the author cites the film, [The Race to Nowhere](#) and a recent [Washington Post](#) article which point out 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.” Indeed research he cites indicates that, “while the race has few winners, the course is littered with the scarred psyches of participants.” “The pressure and anxiety is stealing the one thing our kids can never get back, their childhood. The path is a race to nowhere, and it does not produce better athletes. It produces bitter athletes who get hurt, burnout, and quit sports altogether.”

Dramatic Rise of Injuries

Research revealed in an article titled, [Play now, Pay Later: Inside the rising injuries of youth sports](#) states that over 4.5 million

children play youth sports every year.

Many of them have dreams of someday playing in the big leagues. 3.5 million get injured each year and for some that

dream ends too soon. Those injuries are up by 60 percent for [baseball](#) and [football](#) alone over the last decade. While

professional athletes often can recover from a Tommy John injury for example,

young children are not as lucky because their body is undeveloped and unfinished. “When the injury occurs before the growth plates are closed, the treatment of the injury is much more complex and the results are clearly not as good,” said Dr. David Altchek, and orthopedic surgeon at the Hospital for Special Surgery.



According to [Consumer Reports](#), “sports injuries in children are on the rise—at The Children’s Hospital in Denver, doctors have seen its patient numbers for children with sports injuries double each year since 2007. The CDC states that more than half of the [7 million sports and recreation-related injuries that occur in the U.S. each year](#) are sustained by youth between ages 5 and 24 and gives some common sense advice about protecting your child from becoming part of these statistics:

- **Gear up.** When children are active in sports and recreation, make sure they use the right protective gear for their activity, such as helmets, wrist guards, knee or elbow pads.
- **Use the right stuff.** Be sure that sports protective equipment is in good condition and worn correctly all the time—for example, avoid missing or broken buckles or compressed or worn padding. Poorly fitting equipment may be uncomfortable and may not offer the best protection.
- **Practice makes perfect.** Have children learn and practice skills they need in their activity. For example, knowing how to tackle safely is important in preventing injuries in football and soccer. Have children practice proper form – this can prevent injuries during baseball, softball, and many other activities. Also, be sure to safely and slowly increase activities to improve physical fitness; being in good condition can protect kids from injury.
- **Pay attention to temperature.** Allow time for child athletes to gradually adjust to hot or humid environments to prevent heat-related injuries or illness. Parents and coaches should pay close attention to make sure that players are hydrated and appropriately dressed.
- **Be a good model.** Communicate positive safety messages and serve as a model of safe behavior, including wearing a helmet and following the rules.

That sentiment seems to be echoed by many in the medical community. An article titled [Armed and Delicate](#) written by well-known sports writer, Jack Cavanaugh, quotes George Paletta, the former head doctor for the Cardinals who has performed more than 500 Tommy John surgeries. “This generation of pitchers is paying the price of sport specialization. Kids were much better off when they played multiple sports, rather than just focus on baseball all year. The elbow is not designed for that kind of stress, and an incremental increase in velocity leads to an exponential increase in arm injuries.”

In the same article, the great Nolan Ryan comments, that many arm injuries stem from pitchers not having thrown enough when they were young. Ryan states, “Kids don’t organize pickup

games on the own as we did, when we played baseball almost all day. Many of them haven't built up arm strength by the time they reach the big leagues." Ron Darling, a pitcher with the 1986 championship Mets, agrees. "When I was a kid I was always throwing something, If it wasn't a baseball it was a football or even skimming rocks on the water. That helps build up other muscles."



The article states that injuries requiring Tommy John surgeries for professional baseball players, have increased exponentially. Well-known orthopedist, Dr. James Andrews, says, "I used to do between five and 10 surgeries in a year, I now do 50 to 100."

"I do not think you know at an early age what you are going to like or what you are going to be good at," says Bingham. "So if you specialize too young and then do not really like that sport, or do not do well in it, it leads to burnout. Part of becoming a good athlete is getting touches on the ball but also being both physically and mentally fit."

Justin Redfearn, who runs the Quick Feet track club in Saint George, Utah agrees. "In the last couple of years, I knew a few of my athletes were going to be towards the bottom of the national competitions based on their performance, but we did not focus on that. We never focus on the outcome – the results – we focus on the process, the form and how to do it. I think by focusing on the process, athletes automatically get better."

In his article, [Hey Parents quit raising specialists and start raising omnivores](#), Daniel Coyle notes that by the mid-nineties, "Every sport became a highly organized year-round enterprise: indoor soccer in winter, hockey in summer, baseball all year round. Suddenly kids had to choose before they turned 10 or so, or risk falling behind the pack."

The author cites research that [early specialization](#) increases the chance of injuries, creates worse over-all athletes, makes kids less likely to participate in sports as adults and creates a falsely high barrier to participation.

“Most important, multi-sport kids develop a far more useful skill: how to learn. They learn how to adapt to different situations, make connections, and to take true ownership over the improvement process.”

As examples, the author points to research which finds interesting statistics about the disadvantages of early specialization and the benefits of multisport participation:

- Children who specialize in a single sport account for 50% of overuse injuries in young athletes according to pediatric orthopedic specialists
- Children who specialize early are at a far greater risk for burnout due to stress, decreased motivation and lack of enjoyment

However, children who participate in multi-sport activities tend to develop better overall skills and ability, become smarter, more creative players and that 88% of college athletes surveyed participated in more than one sport as a child. “I think the bigger point is this: when it comes to athletic skills, we are natural omnivores. Our bodies and brains are built to grow through variety of activities, not just one.”

“Think about what happens when you play multiple sports. You develop whole-body skills like balance, quickness, core strength. You cross-train skills from one sport to another,” continues Coyle.

Why play, why outside, why on several teams, what are the benefits? Michelle Graves with The Huntsman Senior Games now, who ran the youth sports program for the City of Saint George, thinks the answers are apparent. “Our Motto was Get out and play. The lessons you learn on a sports field are a lot of what you need to develop and function as an adult and a good citizen in a community. You learn to give and take, sportsmanship, win and lose. We have even seen statistics that say there is a 10% increase in intellect when kids are active as opposed to when they are not.”

Indeed the Youth Sports Program of the Saint George Leisure Services Department is specifically geared to provide children of all abilities, all levels access to physical activities while keeping the costs low to allow as many children as possible to participate no matter what their circumstances.

The final article of this series, will explore how the Leisure Services Department is taking current research and applying it to its programs to provide a beneficial sports and life experience for children.

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