**SPORT SPECIALIZATION**

**In the Early Years**

**Informational:**

The purpose of youth sports should be and was probably predicated on the goal of keeping kids healthy, out of trouble and fostering a lifelong love of exercise and sports. But there’s no longer any tapering in youth sports and those ideals may in some programs be non-existent.

* Unfortunately in today’s society many parents have bought into the idea that, along with some coaches, they believe there are advantages to early sport specialization.
* Overspecialization controlled by parents and coaches to pursue expertise and extrinsic rewards on one sport year round through systematic training and competition while sacrificing their psychological development and well being.
* Overspecialization many times involves adult behaviors that cross the line (abuse). This is when performance becomes more important than the human beings who are producing that performance.
* Additionally, kids should be able to decide when they leave the sampling years, not the parents or coaches.
* The passion and commitment must be inside of young athletes, and the choice to specialize and train to exhaustion is theirs.
* Even at later years why should adults mandate specialization before college when 98% of high school athletes are not going on to play at the collegiate level? (Have our programs evolved into emphasis on only the most gifted?).
* With this in mind we should consider that more kids than ever are playing no sport at all.
* Inactivity among children 6-17 approached 20% last year continuing a disturbing trend spanning the last 6 years (2014).
* **IT’S HARD TO LEGISLATE AN UNLEGISLATABLE SPACE. IT’S FREE REIN OUT THERE.**
* It’s also a powerful tug for many kids to choose one sport over another when they perhaps enjoy others.

**What would be the ideal youth program?**

Ideally, there should be a continuum. Diversification to specialization, to overspecialization, (a narrowing of focus along the continuum).

* Most professional organizations advocate early (12 and under) diversification as opposed to early specialization in sport.
* In the early years there should be a lot of deliberate play and spontaneous practice, as opposed to excessive levels of highly technical deliberate practice. (Where’s the fun? Passion?).
* Specialization should be delayed until adolescence to ensure the child athlete is exposed to a breath of training environments that develop fundamental motor skills before training focuses on sport-specific skills.
* Early sport diversification (sampling) does not hinder elite participation.
* Is linked to a longer sport career.
* Promotes positive youth development.
* Promotes intrinsic regulation and builds a solid foundation of intrinsic motivation through involvement in enjoyable activities.
* Kids should be in youth programs that emphasize deliberate play and enjoyment until age 12. They may begin to narrow their focus after age 13 (middle school years).
* Even during a period of specialization there is room for other activities (a complimentary or secondary activity).
* In a study of some Olympic sports the average age of athletes starting in their chosen sport was 11.5 years of age.
* In the 2017 NFL draft 222 of the 253 players selected played more than one sport in high school.
* In all of major league baseball only 23 of them ever played in the Little League World Series.
* A study of 708 minor league professional baseball players showed that although their mean starting age was 6 years, the players mean age of specializing in baseball was 15 years. 52% did not specialize until at least 17 years of age.
* Studies suggest that playing multiple sports during childhood and adolescence is more effective in developing successful athletes than single sport specialization.
* Multilateral development is essential to optimize the effects of specialized training later in the athlete’s career.
* Some schools are now requiring students to play multiple sports – some coaches are asking kids/parents to sign contracts that promise their children will not play any other sport.
* Behavioral development, biological motivation and physical growth are in a state of constant change during childhood and adolescence. Rates change and interactions vary greatly from one child to the next. **Consideration for** **training.**

**Positive Aspects of Sport Diversification**

* Early diversification develops a broad range of fundamental motor skills and different sport experiences that provide the athlete with more performance options and athleticism if they choose to specialize in one sport later. Many who specialize early lack well rounded motor skills. Do they become a well -rounded athlete?
* Falling in love with a sport has repeatedly been shown to fuel the passion and commitment needed to continue to higher levels of sport.
* Expert athletes tend to participate in many sports and activities.
* Creates more balanced and well-rounded athletes.
* Increases athlete’s chances of reaching elite levels in their sport. Reach higher performance levels.
* Less likely to burn out and do not develop perfectionist attitudes.
* Develop better movement patterns, decision-making skills through a range of activities that require a variety of cognitive and physical functions.
* Keeps them fresh and open-minded.
* Allows athletes to become more athletically diverse and adaptable
* Sampling years should be 6-12. Allows young athletes the opportunity to develop their fundamental movement skills and experience a variety of environments.
* Study findings demonstrated a positive correlation between an increase in sports sampled as a youth and the chances of succeeding and becoming an elite athlete.
* To reach excellence and elite levels in a sport, single sport training is not the vital factor in determining success; developing physical literacy and specializing late is. When sport specific training begins too early, athletes have less success in their sporting careers. **Consequently, late specialization is encouraged.**
* Many college coaches understand the importance of not specializing too early and the positive effects are that multisport athletes bring to their program.
* Urban Meyer and Dabo Sweeney both believe that the multi sport athletes aren’t done developing, are better all-around athletes, and are less likely to suffer burnout.
* A sequential approach to an athlete’s development, progressing from multilateral to specialized training as the athlete matures, appears to be a prerequisite for maximizing sporting performance.
* This part of a youth program includes multifaceted motor development, multisport skills, and some sport specific skills. Allows athlete full development of their physiological systems. It also helps to avoid overuse injuries and staleness in training. And greater athletic success.

**Negative Aspects of Early Sport Specialization**

* Exclusive specialization has contributed to the epidemic of overuse injuries, depriving young athletes of the benefits of cross-training and off season rest.
* Early specialization has been linked to burning out of sport. One sport develops a unidimensional self-concept while multidimensional (self-concept) is important for the mental health and well being of children.
* Risks associated with early specialization include social isolation, burnout and overuse injuries.
* It limits or prevents the development of other transferrable sport-skills, which allows athletes to participate in a variety of sporting and social situations, which increase the likelihood that they will have a positive and fun experience.
* Overuse injuries and chronic injuries – One-dimensional self-concept also.
* May become with obsessed with winning and grow frustrated when they do not win.
* Athletes face not only demands from themselves and their coaches to win, but also intense pressure from their parents.
* Symptoms such as depression, eating disorders, and chronic fatigue may manifest.
* Contributes to less control and freedom due to increased demands on their schedules.
* Ironically, the initial intention of creating an exceptional athlete can result in hindered development and increase the likelihood of that athlete dropping out as a result of anxiety from extreme pressure to win.
* Specialization may work in the short term but research suggests this approach comes with a heavy price. Too many children are suffering “overuse” injuries, lose interest in participating, and/or suffer burnout long before they ever reach the elite level as an athlete.
* Studies also indicate that early specialization might actually be detrimental to long term success in sports, especially team sports.
* 2015 survey in American Journal of Sports Medicine found 60% of all Tommy John surgeries in the U.S. are patients ages 15-19. Tommy John was 31 when he had his.
* Knee injuries, especially in girl’s soccer on the rise. Year round, 7 days a week.
* Youth hockey- 43% of children who tried hockey quit by age 9. Thus USA Hockey’s American Development model pulled the plug on it’s 12 and under pee wee National Championships reducing travel, monetary investment for parents and elite competition. (Concussions as well).
* Five years later it all reversed the decline increasing participation 44%.
* Even Olympic events have changed their age requirements to compete due to athlete abuse in development and physical and mental stress.
* Russian study: Specialized programs started at ages 15-17
* Best performances are achieved after 5-8 years in specialized sports.
* Earlier specialization achieved best performances at junior age prior to 18. Many retired before reaching Senior levels.
* Many of the most successful athletes had never been Junior Champions or held national records. Senior level achieved national and international –class performances.
* Playing one sport at an earlier age all year round. They also supplement their activities with private lessons, from trainers.
* Relative to age in youth programs: Birth dates for very young beginners may have a 10-12 month difference. Biologically offers an advantage to older, heavier, more experienced and stronger athletes.
* Location: Studies indicate a disproportionate number of professional athlete’s grow up in cities with populations less than 500,000 but greater than 10,000.
* No athlete should be restricted from diversification through high school. Age 15?? Possibly. NFHS involvement/legislative????

**Youth Program Organizations**

* Competition vs. Recreational.
* Recreational: Likely to highlight their emphasis on participation, healthy competition, and enjoyment.
* The philosophy of the agency (program offered) has to be consistent with the philosophy of the residents that it’s serving.
* There is a move for programs to attempt to distinguish themselves as either recreational or competitive. Participants and parents can decide what’s best for them. (cost, travel, intensity, competition , etc.).
* Both philosophies can have similar programs but the mission may be a bit different. Participants will be more closely aligned with the program if they decide which one to participate in.
* Friendships at an early age are more important than winning. It’s about memories made. This is what youth sports should be about.
* Everyone plays a role in making youth sports a positive.
* Should we develop a matrix that indicates a basic program type for our youth? i.e.
  + 6-9 **FUN**damentals
  + 9-12 Learn to Train
  + 12-16 Train to Train
  + 16-? Train to compete
  + Elite level – Train to Win!!

**Benefits of Participating in Sports at a Young Age**

Sports give kids the opportunity to enhance self-esteem, socialize with their peers, learn discipline and improve their health and fitness. The latter benefit is more important today than it’s ever been, given the sedate nature of today’s lifestyle.

Three (3) Trends:

1. Most time in sport spent in athletic participation is devoted to structured activities and competitions.
2. Many children are encouraged – even required- by coaches and/or parents not to participate in multiple sports for specialization in one sport at an early age 9-10.
3. Budding athletes are expected to play their sport year round

**Parents want to do well by their kids and help them. What they need is information and guidance. It’d be terrific if, collectively the Nat’l Federation of State High School Association (NFHS) the NCAA and all other organizations were all saying the same thing. That would be a powerful message to parents.**