



Early specialization

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It is all about choices!!

Making a simple choice about choosing the amount and type of sport is not that easy. The following factors contribute to making that choice:

Choosing FOR early specialization

- Choosing only one sport at an early age
Having one sport is practical because it helps parents to cope with driving around, dealing with overlapping seasons and game schedules. This is even more complicated if there is 2 or 3 athletic children in one family!

Choosing AGAINST early specialization

- Emotional burnout
Stress and constant pressure to perform and excel often leaves young athletes physically and mentally exhausted. Burnout is therefore the consequence of continuous physical and emotional pressure without any recuperation periods.
- Overuse injuries
Overuse injuries are when young athletes stress their bodies in the same way over and over again for a great part of the year. It is better for young athletes to challenge their bodies on different levels and ways throughout the year and therefore, develop overall athletic performance. Overtraining in young athletes refer to excessive training and constant competition with inadequate recovery time. Symptoms of overtraining are physical and mental fatigue, and the tendency for an increased rate of injuries.
- Less well rounded athletes
Young athletes need to develop all areas such as physically, psychologically, emotionally and socially. Early specialization could lead to losing transferable athletic skills. Talented individuals spend more time practicing the activity, less time working outside of school, less time socialising with friends, more time on hobbies, and less time doing chores than their less talented counterparts.
- Not developing a wide range of developmental skills
Loss of the diverse social contacts that come with participation in different sports. Early specialisation is thought to isolate the child from peers and interfere

Introduction

Competition, money, performance, winning, survival of fittest and so on is driving our sporting society to a place where children are encouraged to start specializing in one sport at a very early age. The aim of this article is to make everyone aware of the positive and negative influences and consequences of early specialization in sport.

Consider the following two stories and reflect on the question at the end as honestly as you can.

"I remember the days when I came back from school, dressed in my playing clothes and met my friends on the corner of our street. We used to go down to the river where we all played, everything from pirates, racing boats, to building tree houses. At 18h00 we had to return home for dinner and the rest of the daily chores".

"When my school breaks up at 13h30 one of my parents pick me up and we drive to squash training. Due to limited time, I get dressed in the car and also eat my lunch. I will practice squash until 16h00, quickly get dressed again and then be in the pool at 16h30 for my second sport's training session. We go home at 18h30 where I will start with my other routine activities, bath, eat and homework".

If you honestly read the above which would you choose, firstly for yourself and then for your child?

in sport

with normal identity development.

- Over-emphasizing winning

Early specialization often puts an over-emphasis on winning and neglects developmental experiences. "You don't sacrifice the development welfare of a child for a win-loss record". Physically and emotionally immature children who are expected to perform on high competitive levels often fall into the cycle of failure. This inhibits them to try other sports or develop other abilities. They are often left with experiences of failing which is detrimental to their development as people and athletes.

The role of parents and coaches in early specialization

Most of the pressure to specialize early comes from parents and coaches.

Talent development is a long-term process that involves more than just the talented individual, but also a strong support system with parents playing the primary role. Talent needs to be viewed as a developmental process rather than an all-or-nothing phenomenon. Talent development is not solely dependent on early specialization, in order for talent to grow it has to be viewed by society as valuable, as well as nurtured by parents, teachers and coaches. For talent to continue to develop throughout a child's life, information and knowledge; motivation and discipline are required for ultimate superior performance.

Families and in particular parents play a vital role in the development of an elite athlete. From the ages of 6-13, children should participate in multiple sports for fun. Parents who encourage such involvement and who believe that sport contributes to the child's overall development, allowing the child to experience a wide variety of sports, enhance the talent and overall wellbeing of the child. Parents should not have expectations or goals with regards to a specific sport for their child at this stage.

From the ages of 13-15, parents need to become committed supporters of their child. Minimal pressure should be placed on the child to participate in any one sport and parents should take on more of a supporter/follower versus leadership role. This would include financial and time sacrifices in order to optimise the child's participation.

From the age of 15 upwards, parents need to become

an important source of social-emotional support, especially during times of failure and setbacks. Little pressure on the child is of paramount importance at this stage. Parents also need to serve as models for disciplined independence and foster disciplined independence in their talented children. Parents need to model hard work while supporting their children. They need to reinforce their children for working independently and expect this type of behaviour from them.

It is about the child!

The concept of early specialisation has mainly come about due to the pressure from coaches, the high expectations of parents and the child's desire to participate in competitions and a societal emphasis on early specialisation. This involves the skipping of the fundamental stage of sport development and the overemphasising of winning, rankings, single sport involvement and down playing the role of fun.

According to the literature of talent development there is a great concern that without developing the love of the game, children will not have the motivation to sustain the effort needed to pursue excellence at a later stage of the process.

Ages 6 -13 years are called "sampling years", a time when children should participate in a variety of sports where the emphasis should be fun! From age 13 years they are entering adolescence and they should be more physically and emotionally mature to make informed choices regarding their own needs rather than fulfilling a parent or coaches dream.

Teenagers cannot develop talent unless they are internally motivated and enjoy the activity, while working hard to achieve their goal. Fun and enjoyment experienced through sport participation during the sampling years (6-13) may be critical to the development of intrinsic motivation, which is paramount to the success of the more structured and performance-orientated specialisation and investment years (15- above). Research has shown that lack of fun is a frequently cited reason for withdrawal from sport. Early specialisation often involves activities which are supportive to the development of the athlete. For example activities not directly related to the sport such as, cross training, running, weights, swimming, flexibility, fitness, etc. The literature indicates that such support-activities appear to be less than enjoyable for children. Early involvement and participation in such practice activities that are not enjoyable may ultimately undermine the intrinsic motivation to continue in sport. Children orientated sport programmes should not focus on developing athletic fitness through intense and routine training, but rather focus on sport-specific practice, games and play activities that foster fun and enjoyment. Additional services are not beneficial to early specialisation, in fact, it more than likely leads to sport drop out.



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Summary

In order to develop their talents, athletes must and should specialize. The critical question is at what age young athlete's should do so. Professionals are concerned that specialization is occurring at too early an age. While early specialization does have some distinct advantages, it may have negative physical, psychological and social effects on a child. Information, knowledge and recommendations from professionals to coaches and parents should help in the managing and decision making process when it comes to early specialization 🌈