



Specialization:

Does it Ensure a College Athletic Career?

By James White and David Oatman

Introduction

What are the long-term effects of young athletes specializing in sports? Parents, coaches and athletes continue to believe specialization is the key to success. It has been shown to be a very effective means of producing elite athletes across the United States and the world. However, opponents of specialization would argue that it is a detriment to today's youth and has begun to cause major problems in youth sports.

Two decades ago, the norm for young athletes was to play a sport in its traditional season. Football and soccer would be played in the fall, basketball during the winter and baseball and track and field in the spring. In specializing, children can play about any sport they want year-round. There are fall baseball leagues, summer basketball leagues and all types of indoor facilities to accommodate numerous types of sports (Fish, 2003).

Today, millions of parents and coaches are looking to prepare their children for a Division I athletic scholarship or a professional playing career. To those parents, coaches and athletes who support specialization, the benefits far outweigh the negatives. Many parents and coaches believe the fast track to athletic success is through specializing in one specific sport.

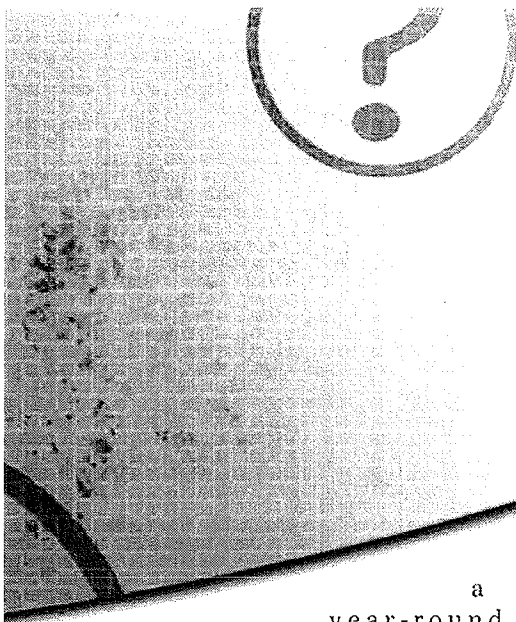
On the other hand, the supporters of non-specialization would rather see their youth playing competitively in a wide variety of sports. Competition is still of importance, but the means of being successful in sports is different. These supporters believe that development of the child, as a whole, is better suited when specialization does not occur; that children should play a variety of sports for enjoyment and for personal and athletic growth.

Benefits of Specialization

Specialization in youth sports has become popular because some believe more is better. The belief is that more playing time, more practice, more conditioning and more coaching will lead to a child becoming better at a particular sport. Superstars like Tiger Woods, who began playing golf at age three, and gold medalist figure skater Sarah Fisher, who also began at age three, are celebrated (Fish, 2003). These types of superstars add fuel to the fire for the debate about children specializing in a specific sport at an early age.

Benefits of specialization can be seen in motor skill acquisition. Expert performance is hypothesized to result from a period of preparation in three phases. The first phase begins with an introduction to the activity, followed by formal instruction. During the second phase, the individual increases practice time and ends in a decision to commit completely to the task. The third phase consists of full-time involvement in the activity (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Romer, 1993). Athletes who specialize at earlier ages have been shown to have a higher level of performance than those who specialize later in life (Hecimovich, 2004). With the relatively short career of most athletes and a perceived finite amount of time with which an individual can reach peak performance, many athletes and coaches believe it is a mistake not to specialize (Wiersma, 2000).

Parents have increasingly become focused on athletic scholarships because of the notoriety it brings to their families, money saved on college expenses and the chance to thoroughly enjoy their child's college experience. With specialization, a child might have an increased chance of getting that big-time scholarship. College exposure is necessary in certain sports like girls' volleyball and soccer where they compete on



a year-round basis (Hecimovich, 2004). With the ever-growing population of young athletes, it seems to make sports specialization a necessity.

Risks of Specialization

Competing in numerous types of sports at a young age can be essential to proper growth and development as a child. Children who participate in multiple sports, as youth, will gain an increase in multilateral skills, build self-esteem, develop physically and emotionally and avoid sports burnout in adolescence. Developing a wide variety of sports to compete in at a young age can help further multilateral skills. It can also help prepare for future success in athletics. Multilateral training is a philosophy to develop bio-motor qualities in planned balance. This is essential to long-term success. The bio-motor qualities are strength, speed, endurance, flexibility and balance. A strong, balanced foundation of these qualities enhances performance in any sports (McCormick, 2006).

By playing a variety of sports, athletes develop many of the general skills needed for advanced participation. For example, playing baseball enhances hand-eye coordination, playing soccer increases endurance and playing football increases strength and speed. Athletes who only play one sport develop a shallower foundation and require remedial training to develop broader,

general skills. Also, the repetitive movements of only one sport can cause a decrease in performance and flexibility due to muscle imbalances and tightness (McCormick, 2006).

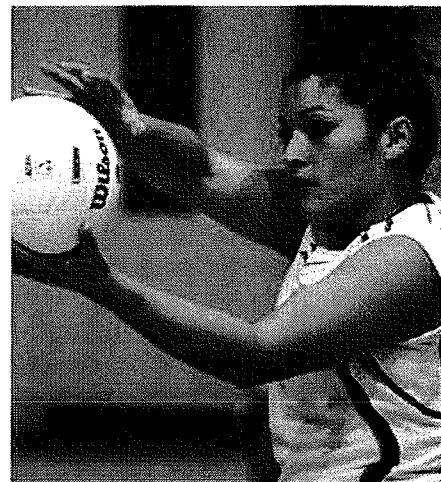
A child's self-esteem should also be taken into account when considering age of specialization. Children at young ages are vulnerable to stress put on them by parents and coaches. The specialization age has become extremely competitive and winning is the main priority. The American Academy of Pediatrics (2000) came out against sports specialization for young children because of the stress, overtraining and burnout associated with specialization. Both the Youth Sports Institute and the American College of Sports Medicine recommended non-specialization for the same reasons (Fish, 2003).

Study, Participants, Results and Implications

A descriptive survey was administered to collegiate football and field hockey athletes in the spring of 2008. The survey consisted of 12 questions and was developed by the researcher. The first part of the survey requested demographic information from the participants: years playing sports, current sports participation, scholarship status, gender, age and year of college. The second part requested the participants' perceptions concerning specialization in sports during childhood, ages best suited for specialization, benefits of specialization, risks of specialization and the importance of specialization.

There were 71 participants from

football and field hockey who were selected from a population of approximately 254 team sport athletes at a university in the Midwest. These athletic programs are NCAA Division I-AA and Division I programs, respectively. The population was comprised of athletes of different ages, genders, years in college and total years playing sports. All of the athletes compete in only one sport at the university.



Following are the highlights of the survey:

- The majority of participants were males (77%) as opposed to (13%) females with the majority of the athletes around 20 years old and were either in their first or second year of college.
- A lot of players, coaches and parents gauge athletic success on whether or not an athlete obtains a college scholarship. In this study, it was found that the athletes either had partial scholarship (38%) or full scholarship (42%).
- The athletes averaged around 12-14 years of sports competition. The starting age also averaged at 7-8 years old. Twenty-four percent of

the athletes did not start playing sports until they were between the ages of 9-12+ years of age. ***This shows that to be successful in sports you do not necessarily have to start when you are 3-4 years old.***

■ It was found that the average number of sports played prior to high school was four sports and that 83 percent played at least three or more sports prior to high school. ***This reflected that the athletes surveyed participated in a wide variety of sports prior to high school. It does not appear that specialization played a factor in their athletic careers when they were in early childhood.***

■ When they were in high school, the average was just under three sports and the majority of the athletes played three or more sports during high school (66%). Only a small percentage specialized in sports during high school (2.8%). ***This data implies that these college athletes did not lean towards specialization in high school and that most participated in a wide variety of sports, which would go against all ideas that specialization is necessary and required to become successful in collegiate sports.***

■ The average age of specialization for these athletes was 17-18 years old and the majority of the athletes (49%) waited until 17 or older to specialize. Only 15 percent of the athletes specialized when they were 10 years or younger. The age the athletes determined was the proper age for specialization was 15-16 years old. ***The results further imply that athletes do not feel it is necessary to specialize at young ages.***

■ The athletes believed (63%) that specializing was either most beneficial or somewhat beneficial; however, 36 percent believed that it was either no change, somewhat unnecessary or unnecessary. The athletes (87%) believed that playing multiple sports was either most beneficial or

somewhat beneficial. The athletes also believed (11%) that playing multiple sports were either no change, somewhat unnecessary and unnecessary. ***These results show that the athletes firmly believe that playing multiple sports is beneficial. However, they also believed that specializing has its benefits.***

Summary

So does specializing in team sports during childhood help develop into a college athletic career? No, the data from this study indicates that specialization in sports during childhood is far less effective than playing multiple sports during those same years. With all the fame and fortune that goes with college athletics and the financial benefits of an athletic scholarship, many have lost focus of the true meaning behind sports. In the researcher's mind, the main purpose of sports is to learn how to work hard, to learn the importance of teamwork, to learn discipline and to have fun. Children at young ages should learn the fundamentals of various sports and just enjoy playing sports. With specialization, there are greater chances of burnout and an early departure from sports. It is hoped, in the future, that more coaches, parents and players realize that they will have minimal regrets if they have quality experiences in a wide variety of sports. **CQ**

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS:

James White, who recently completed the requirements for his master's of science in education (physical education emphasis) degree, is employed at the Cox Hospital system as a nationally certified Therapeutic Recreation Specialist in Springfield, Missouri. He also competed as a wide receiver for the Missouri State University football program, an NCAA I-AA level program.



David Oatman is a professor in the Health, Physical Education and Recreation Department at Missouri State University (MSU) in Springfield, Missouri. He's been employed with MSU for the past 30 years. He was James' advisor in his recently completed master's program.



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