Sports Specialization and Burnout

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Over 60 million kids between the ages of 6-18 participate in organized sports in the U.S., a number that continues to increase each year. As athletes and parents try to gain an edge over the competition, many will attempt to specialize in a single sport at an early age. The question is, though, is early sports specialization helpful or harmful?

Sports specialization, defined as intense, year round training in a single sport, with the exclusion of other sports, first gained popularity in Eastern European development programs for young athletes. This theory has likely been reinforced through profiles of athletes who have achieved tremendous success at a young age-LeBron James in basketball, Venus and Serena Williams in tennis and countless U.S. Olympians.

For some activities like gymnastics, figure skating, swimming, diving, and dance, early specialization may indeed be beneficial because peak performance in these sports typically occurs in adolescence/early adulthood or before physical development is complete. Muscle bulk is relatively less important and large physical size may be detrimental.

Unfortunately, there isn’t much to show that early specialization in most other sports is constructive. To start with, the odds of a child making a living playing sports are extremely low. Fewer than 10% of high schoolers will play in college and less than 2% will be drafted by professional leagues. The outlook is even worse for younger athletes. Tens of millions of kids play football, basketball, soccer, and baseball, but only a few thousand total positions are available in those sports’ professional leagues in the U.S.

Furthermore, there are many studies showing that playing many different sports as a child before choosing one sport to focus on later in adolescence is more likely to lead to success at the college or professional level. Most college athletes report that their first organized sports participation was in a sport other than the one they played in college. Elite athletes are actually more likely to begin intense training at a later age when compared to near-elite athletes. This early diversification also tends to lead to the development of a wider range of fundamental motor skills, fewer injuries and more enjoyment of and longevity in sport.

Finally, not only is early specialization not beneficial for most sports, in many cases it can actually be harmful. Early specialization has been linked to delayed growth and maturation, is associated with a higher rate of overuse injury, and can lead to social isolation and burnout.

Burnout refers to a series of psychological, physiologic and hormonal changes that result in decreased sports performance.

**Burnout symptoms include:**
- Poor sleep
- Exhaustion
- Weight loss
- Muscle soreness
- Decreased performance
- Feeling depressed
- Losing enjoyment from playing sports

**Risk factors for burnout**
- Heavy training load without adequate rest
- Repetitive or boring training
- Too many intense competitions
- Negative feedback from coaches/parents

**Characteristics in the athlete:**
- Feel like they can’t meet the demands of their sport
- Low self-esteem
- Perfectionists
- Need to please others
- Anxiety
- Little control over decision making in their sport

Studies have shown that of the top 10 reasons kids play sports, #1 is to have fun. Winning is way down at #8 on the list. There are no hard and fast rules about sports participation when it comes to how early, how many, and how often, but here are some guidelines to help parents:

- Preschool should be a time for free play and learning motor skills like running, jumping, throwing and catching. Vision, attention span and the ability to understand competition are not fully developed in these kids so highly competitive sports should be avoided.
- As kids get older, a good rule of thumb is that they should not practice more hours per week in sports than their age.
- Let kids determine which sports they play and how much. It’s good to expose them to a bunch of sports early on, but as they get older let them choose what they like and never pressure them into continuing a sport they no longer enjoy.