

# Same sport year round - a recipe for disaster?

Written by Working With Parents In Sport

## It is possible to have too much of a good thing

Unless your child is involved in early specialisation sports such as gymnastics and diving, where competitors generally peak during their teenage years, you should be doing everything in your power to ensure your child experiences a wide variety of sports during their early years.

Professional sportsmen often have a couple of months away from their sport during the course of the year, yet many parents are finding it acceptable to keep their child playing the same sport all year round.

In many cases the short term gains will be noticeable and your child may well stand above his peers in what they are achieving,- but at what cost?

## Short term gains v long term goals

Latest research shows that children who participated in a number of different sports during their formative years, often overtake those that specialised early in terms of their performance.

Sport is a lifelong journey and it may take until the teenage years for the multi sport athlete to overtake the single sport athlete, but our children should be entering into sport for lifelong enjoyment and not short term gains.

Research by the US Olympic committee, showed that US Olympians were involved in an average of three sports a year up until the age of 14.

South African rugby data shows that only a small percentage of those involved in the schools rugby cup at under 13 level end up playing in the same competition 5 years later as under 18's.

The biggest issue for children who participate in a single sport all year round, is the major risk of dropping out altogether due to sheer boredom and the injury risk associated with the same repetitive movements and actions.

As sport has become more and more accessible, in some form to younger children many of the building blocks that allow children to perform well are being forgotten. Time needs to be spent developing basic coordination, through running, jumping, hopping, landing, falling, skipping, catching and kicking.

If a child only does one sport it is highly unlikely that enough attention will be paid or be able to cater for all of these movements.

## Variety is the spice of (sporting) life

In fact what has been forgotten in many of these cases is unstructured play. Children are no longer being sent out into the garden to rag around, encouraged to climb trees and build dens as well as making up their own games. We have all become too dependent on structured, organised play.

From my own experience of having a break in the seasons and children playing different sports as a coach and from watching my own child, many players return to action at the start of the season no further behind their counterparts who have played all year round.

In fact I would argue that they have returned more refreshed to tackle the new challenges on offer and their progress is greater.

The old adage still remains here that variety is the spice of life!

## The stats don't lie

The following extract taken from the "Changing the Game Project" written by John O'Sullivan although based on American data will hopefully make you think twice about specialising too early.

First, here are five research excerpts that demonstrate how early specialization may negatively affect your child:

1. Children who specialize in a single sport account for 50% of overuse injuries in young athletes according to pediatric orthopedic specialists
2. A study by Ohio State University found that children who specialized early in a single sport led to higher rates of adult physical inactivity. Those who commit to one sport at a young age are often the first to quit, and suffer a lifetime of consequences.
3. In a study of 1200 youth athletes, Dr Neeru Jayanthi of Loyola University found that early specialization in a single sport is one of the strongest predictors of injury. Athletes in the study who specialized were 70% to 93% more likely to be injured than children who played multiple sports!
4. Children who specialize early are at a far greater risk for burnout due to stress, decreased motivation and lack of enjoyment

5. Early sport specialisation is associated with increased risk of anterior knee pain disorders including PFP, Osgood Schlatter and Sinding Larsen-Johansson compared to multi-sport athletes, and may lead to higher rates of future ACL tears (added May 2014)

## What the smart people say

If that is not enough for you, here are six research based reasons for multi-sport participation:

1. **Better Overall Skills and Ability:** Research shows that early participation in multiple sports leads to better overall motor and athletic development, longer playing careers, increased ability to transfer sports skills other sports and increased motivation, ownership of the sports experience, and confidence.
2. **Smarter, More Creative Players:** Multi-sport participation at the youngest ages yields better decision making and pattern recognition, as well as increased creativity. These are all qualities that coaches of high level teams look for.
3. **Most College Athletes Come From a Multi-Sport Background:** A 2013 American Medical Society for Sports Medicine survey found that 88% of college athletes surveyed participated in more than one sport as a child
4. **10,000 Hours is not a Rule:** In his survey of the scientific literature regarding sport specific practice in *The Sports Gene*, author David Epstein finds that most elite competitors require far less than 10,000 hours of deliberate practice. Specifically, studies have shown that basketball (4000), field hockey (4000) and wrestling (6000) all require far less than 10,000 hours. Even Anders Ericsson, the researcher credited with discovering the 10,000 hour rule, says the misrepresentation of his work, popularized by Malcolm Gladwell in *Outliers*, ignores many of the elements that go into high-performance (genetics, coaching, opportunity, luck) and focuses on only one, deliberate practice. That, he says, is wrong.
5. **Free Play Equals More Play:** Early specialization ignores the importance of deliberate play/free play. Researchers found that activities which are intrinsically motivating, that maximise fun and provide enjoyment are incredibly important. These are termed deliberate play (as opposed to deliberate practice, which are activities motivated by the goal of performance enhancement and not enjoyment). Deliberate play increases motor skills, emotional ability, and creativity. Children allowed deliberate play also tend spend more time engaged in a sport than athletes in structured training with a coach.
6. **There are Many Paths to Mastery:** A 2003 study on professional ice hockey players found that while most pros had spent 10,000 hours or more involved in sports prior to age 20, only 3000 of those hours were involved in hockey specific deliberate practice (and only 450 of those hours were prior to age 12).

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