

## The Art of Balance

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### The Art of Balance: Specialization & Youth Sports Athletes

As the end of the school year approaches, many parents are faced with the annual predicament: “*What should my kids do this summer?*” If you’re like us, you’re thinking about how to keep your kids entertained, engaged, active and busy. (Not to mention out of trouble!) And while there are literally hundreds of options for kids activities during the summer, youth sports parents face a unique dilemma: the challenge of specialization.

This month, the team at Responsible Sports has turned to the experts at Positive Coaching Alliance as well as the professional coaches and athletes who regularly contribute to our Responsible Sports Community, including Jessica Mendoza, Doug Wilson, and others to ask: *should kids specialize in sports?*

### Why do youth athletes specialize?

There are a host of reasons: pressure from coaches, high expectations from parents, encouragement from college recruiters, or even the athlete’s own desire to participate in the highest levels of the sport. In general, there seems to be a growing societal emphasis on specialization – and not just in youth sports. But as Responsible Sport Parents and Responsible Coaches, our challenge is to understand the issues surrounding specialization, and then determine our own personal “specialization philosophy.”

### The Research

Our exploration of the idea of specialization begins with a quick look at the research out there – and there is a great deal of it! There have been several studies of talented kids (not only in sports, but also in music, the arts, etc.), and many of these studies have concluded that there are ‘stages’ of talent development. In one study of highly accomplished individuals conducted by Benjamin Bloom, the stages are identified as:

- The Early Years (called the ‘Romance’ or ‘Romantic’ Phase), where kids develop a love for the activity, feel free to explore and have fun in the activity, are encouraged by those around them and ultimately find success in the activity.
- The Middle Years (labeled the ‘Precision’ or ‘Technical’ Phase), where an experienced coach or teacher begins imparting the skills of the activity and the focus is on mastery and skill development.
- The Later Years (the ‘Integration’ or ‘Mature’ Phase), where a master teacher or coach is involved, where a great deal of time is dedicated to practice, and the focus becomes optimal performance. In this stage, a significant amount of time is dedicated to the activity.<sup>1</sup>

What is interesting to note is that for the individuals studied, the phases occurred over a 15- to 20-year period. Each person moved through each phase “in a developmental sequence, without skipping phases.” That’s a critical idea in youth sports – that kids need

to have the early fun stage, followed by the middle skills stage, before ever getting to the later optimal performance and “dedication” phase.

Another study of elite athletes by Jean Côté (1999) observed three phases: Sampling (age 6-13), Specializing (13-15) and Investing (15+). Côté’s study observed that during the Sampling phase, the parents encouraged kids to play multiple sports and take in a broad set of experiences, but that by the Specializing phase, both the youth athlete and the parent had selected the preferred sport, although this choice did not preclude the child also playing other sports.<sup>2</sup>

A study by Dan Gould & Sarah Carson in 2004 noted that many parents are taking a “professionalized approach” to initial youth sports involvement and skip Bloom’s Romance Phase by “overemphasizing winning, rankings, single-sport involvement and downplaying the role of fun.”<sup>3</sup>

And finally one last piece of data from some of the research out there. A study conducted by Lenny Wiersma in 2000 found, not surprisingly, that 98% of athletes will never reach the highest levels of sports. Wiersma also noted that “from a sociological perspective, early specialization is thought to isolate the young athlete from peers and interfere with normal identity development.”<sup>4</sup>

### **On-The-Field Experts**

So what do elite athletes and coaches say about specialization? What was their experience with their parents? What would they recommend? Over time, many professional athletes and coaches have joined the Responsible Sports community and have shared their thoughts on the topic of specialization.

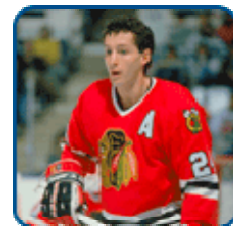
#### **Jessica Mendoza, Olympic Gold Medal winning softball player**

“No doubt about it, definitely play as many sports as you can. I was a two-sport athlete in high school (basketball and softball as well), and I would say a majority of my USA teammates were two-sport, if not three-sport, athletes as well. My point is two-fold: other sports can help build and develop other skills that [an athlete] might not get in softball, but needs; for example, agility, explosiveness, reaction and quickness. The second point is if you narrow your options to only one sport all the time, [an athlete] can burn out. I see that happen more and more often with parents trying to do softball all the time with their kids. So have her play [other sports] and softball for as long as she is happy!”



#### **Doug Wilson, Hall of Fame hockey player and current San Jose Sharks General Manager**

“The best thing that my parents ever did. They made me play everything. They didn’t make me, they gave me the opportunity to play everything. And one of the wonderful moments was, I was a pretty good hockey player, but I wasn’t really good in, maybe, one of the other sports. They’d make me go play that sport so that I would have the perspective, from the other kids that might not be really good at something, but they’re playing it because they love it. And that



way, you can become, I think, a good teammate and a good friend because you learn through shared experiences. And I always look back, and I did a lot of, as I say, every sport and every activity. And my parents did it for a reason. And now, I understand it and truly appreciate it.”

**Jim Thompson, Executive Director and founder of Positive Coaching Alliance**

"Staying with multiple sports longer offers multiple benefits for athletes:

- It decreases burn out because playing one sport year round can come to seem like a job rather than something they can't wait to do.
- It lessens the chance of repetitive stress injuries as athletes use different muscles in different sports.
- For eventual specialists, it gives them a better chance to find a sport that fits them just right.
- And, it increases general athletic skills, such as balance or agility, that transfer from one sport to another.



NBA star Steve Nash is just one of many elite athletes who say their involvement with more than one sport (soccer in his case) helped them excel in the sport they ultimately chose to specialize in."

**Alexi Lalas, USA World Cup soccer player**

“Sports, and certainly the possibility of one of their children becoming a professional athlete, was not necessarily high on the list when [my parents] thought of what they envisioned for their children. [They believed] if [sports] makes you happy and you’re enjoying it, do it. But also recognize that there are all these other things that you might be good at, that you might enjoy. I was heavily involved in ice hockey. And I tried absolutely everything out there. But I was also never in a situation where I was pressured by my parents to play sports. And it’s not that they weren’t proud of me, it’s not that they didn’t support me in what I was doing, but it wasn’t a situation where I was doing it for my father or I was doing it for anybody else. They just recognized that sports could not only help me from a physical standpoint, but an emotional standpoint, and growing and becoming a better person. And even though they didn’t have a sports background, per se, they recognized the value of sports in a young kid in terms of growing up, not just what it does on the field, but what it does off the field.”



**Tina Syer, Associate Director of Positive Coaching Alliance and former Stanford University standout field hockey player**

“Only kids themselves can really determine when the time is right to specialize. I often tell kids that if they are enjoying a sport but are feeling pressure from coaches or fellow athletes to give it up and specialize, that they should stand up for themselves and enlist the support of their parents for their decision. The research is on their side for why they should keep playing the sports they love. And on the flip side, when they are ready to specialize, then go for it. Pursue the sport – or sports – that make you happy. And just remember to cross-train your body to avoid injury and try to cross-train your mind to avoid burnout.”



What we found fascinating was that each of these experts had personal experience with playing multiple sports, but clearly at some point specialized on the sport in which they achieved notoriety. Their experience supports the research idea of needing to go through each phase of sport involvement. And each seems to reinforce the element of fun and enjoyment in the sport as critical to their long term success.

**“What’s your policy?”**

What is your personal philosophy on specialization for youth athletes? At what age do you think it is appropriate? And what can parents do to support youth athletes in the challenges associated with the pressures of specialization? How do you manage your kids’ summer activities – when the pressures of sports camps and sports training programs intensify – with specialization in mind?

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<sup>1</sup> Bloom, B.S. (Ed.) (1985). *Developing talent in young people*. NY: Ballantine.

<sup>2</sup> Côté, J. (1999). The influence of the family in the development of talent in sport. *The Sport Psychologist*, 13, 395-417.

<sup>3</sup> Gould, D, & Carson, S. (2004). Myths surrounding the role of youth sports in developing Olympic champions. *Youth Studies Australia*, 23(1), 19-26.

<sup>4</sup> Wiersma, L.D., (2000). Risks and benefits of youth sport specialization: Perspectives and recommendations. *Pediatric Exercise Science*, 12, 13-22.