

Early specialization?

In the 21st Century we now seem to have mini-professional athletes playing middle and high school sports. They aren't getting paid, but they are dedicating so much time to one sport that the other activities they were once involved in are now just things of the past, memories. Some of these kids are quality athletes who are no longer representing their school's teams; instead they are focused on specialization and becoming the best at some other sport. They believe that their dedication and hard work will be rewarded with a scholarship or a professional contract.

Those of us who have been involved in youth or high school sports have either lived out a similar scenario or have known somebody who has. I have a friend who, when our sons were on the verge of becoming teenagers, seemed pretty confident that he knew which sport each kid (in our little group of about 15) should start dedicating themselves to. He, and others with the same kind of thinking, figure that kids at that age should be making decisions about what sport they want to excel at. At that time they could then eliminate time spent on other sports, since those are not the sports that they will be playing at the next level.

What? What is that "next level" we hear people speak of? Let's see. First our kids compete—or more accurately, "participate"—in little league baseball, Y soccer, basketball and flag football. What is the next level? Is it travel teams, such as U-10 or U-14 or whatever? Travel teams at 10 years old?

Let's start at the top to figure out which level comes next. For some sports there are professional opportunities. Before that there is college, and before college there is high school and perhaps club teams or travel ball. Prior to that is middle school, and still more club and travel teams, back down to little leagues and beginning athletic programs.

Are our children making decisions at very young ages to give up playing a sport so that they can excel in another? I am not sure that is the way it usually works. What 14-year old athletic kid suddenly says "I am not playing volleyball (or basketball) this winter because I want to concentrate on softball (or baseball, girl's basketball, football, etc.)"? Not many, I think. Often, young athletes are being encouraged by coaches and/or parents to specialize. And it seems to happen more and more every year.

I suppose if the best athletes are giving up sports at early ages then there are more roster spots available for other kids who want to play and enjoy it. Those are the kids who aren't playing for the future; they are playing for today. The future can be all that we want it to be, but there are no guarantees. As a matter of fact, in research conducted by the NCAA in six sports, a very small percentage of high school athletes go on to compete in college (men's basketball, 2.9 percent; women's basketball, 3.1 percent; football, 5.8 percent; baseball, 5.6 percent, ice hockey, 12.9 percent, men's soccer, 5.7 percent).

There is a belief by some that hard work and dedication to one sport will help an athlete earn a scholarship or a chance at professional sports.

Hard work and dedication may increase an athlete's chances. The NCAA Division I scholarships and professional contracts are most often not given to the most dedicated, but to the most physically gifted. Another view is that all the effort in the world isn't going to get a kid a scholarship if he or she does not have superior athletic ability.

Perhaps before we (parents and coaches) guide our young athletes away from sports that they genuinely enjoy, we should be absolutely certain that early specialization will ensure that the athlete's (not the adult's) goals will be achieved. I have never heard a college athlete tell me that he wished he would have stopped playing a second sport earlier; they most often have said that they wished they would have continued playing the secondary sports all through high school. They believe they may have missed out on a great experience.