Grand Theft!: How Adults have Stolen Youth Sports

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Abstract

The pressure of being successful in youth sports has increased dramatically across the United States. Parents are investing thousands of dollars each year to ensure their children have the best opportunity to be successful now, and in the future. They are also steering their children toward a single sport. Specialization for young, developing athletes can have serious effects that may deter them from continuing to pursue athletics. Burn out, overuse injuries, and missing the opportunity to find something they are truly passionate about can potentially lead to the end, of what could have been a very promising career for a young athlete. This article examines the differing theories of early sport specialization and early sport diversification in youth sports along with three common concerns related to early sport specialization.
Introduction

Wayne Gretzky, Venus and Serena Williams, Tiger Woods, Michael Phelps, the list goes on and on of children who took the sports world by storm and became very successful professional athletes. However, for every child star that emerges, there are many children who not only fall short of professional sports, but also leave sports all together (Jayanthi et al., 2013). This issue is one that begs the question, have the dreams of adults overshadowed the real purpose of youth sports? While providing opportunities for children is important, the pressure to excel at all costs has robbed many children of the love of the game and the enjoyment of their youth sport activities (Goldberg, 2017).

Youth sports found its origin in the training of young boys to work together to meet a goal they could later use in their lives as industry workers (Wiggins, 1987). A secondary goal of youth sports was to limit the numbers of young boys roaming the streets in gangs and wreaking havoc in their neighborhoods (Farray, 2008). Adding more opportunities to participate through team sports, new playgrounds, and professionally trained physical education teachers provided many children with an outlet for their energy while also teaching them important social and motor skills. A lack of true organization existed in the beginning, but the thought that “evil rather than good” would arise from unstructured play brought adults into the fray in an organizational capacity (Farray, 2008). The youth sports movement was fully underway in the United States by 1903, creating competition, elitism, and exclusion amongst the country’s youth (Wiggins, 1987). This winning-centric world of sports has fostered a culture of specialization and early dedication for our youth, often at the expense of social development (Wiersma, 2000).

While there has been extensive research on the benefits of early specialization in sport, some dangers are associated with this narrow approach. These dangers, as speculated by Wiersma (2000), range from poor sociological and psychological development to a limited development of overall motor development. While these issues are certainly alarming, perhaps the biggest detractor to early
specialization is sport burnout and dropout (Baker, 2003). The risks involved with sport specialization at a young age are far too great considering the few rewards.

The purpose of this paper is to identify the pitfalls of early specialization and provide evidence to the benefits of a less competitive, diversified (also known as sampling) approach to youth sports. In addition, the paper points to the fact that sport specialization has a greater chance of negatively, rather than positively, affecting the future of a young athlete.

The Competitive World of Youth Sports

In the ever-evolving world of competitive sports at the youth level, there is a problem that has risen to the forefront in that of young athletes choosing to participate in a single sport through a majority of a calendar year (Smith, 2017). Parents believe there is no other option, in order to keep their children from falling behind, as they fear there is no catching up (Benson & Strand, 2014; Smith, 2017). Expenses are becoming greater for parents, as is the time commitment necessary to meet all of the expectations required to help their child become an elite level athlete (Lumpkin, Stoll, & Beller, 2003). Unfortunately, many parents do not understand the potential risk they are exposing their children to at such an early age.

Although some have made a case for early sport specialization (Christianson & Deutsch, 2012), a recent study concluded that athletes who specialize in a single sport sustain lower-extremity injuries at a significantly higher rate than athletes who do not specialize in one sport (McGuine, et al., 2017). For any athlete, remaining healthy is crucial to the development of the skills required to play a sport. Rehabilitation from injury takes time, thus slowing progress in sport skill development. Sustaining an injury can be very taxing from a mental standpoint as well, and can lead to other issues (Wiersma, 2000). Both parents and coaches must be aware of the injury risk involved with overemphasis in a single sport (National Federation of State High School Associations, 2016).

Opportunities for youngsters to participate in multiple sports are everywhere. Playgrounds and parks are places where children learn to love sports while also learning to develop problem-solving skills when playing sports. The love of a sport is where the desire to excel is born. This is also where children
find what they are truly good at. Too much parent involvement often times leads to the parents directing the athlete to what they believe is best for them (Counter, 2014). Parents see opportunities for success when their child shows signs of being good at a young age, and push their child to excel, even if the child does not feel the same passion. Parents are driven by society, and in today’s society, many believe that winning is of utmost importance (Smith, 2017).

**Early Specialization vs. Early Diversification**

There are two distinct schools of thought when considering childhood sports participation. The first is that early specialization, characterized by deliberate practice to improve skills, is essential for anyone hoping to develop expertise in a given task. The second states that early diversification of sport experiences, characterized by play-like participation with a lesser emphasis on developing skills, will help to improve a child’s intrinsic motivation in sport as well as prevent burnout due to overtraining (Baker, 2003). Both specialization and diversification have success stories and heartbreaks, but the evidence forces one to wonder how our society got to this point (Malina, 2010).

Looking more closely at the early specialization theory, research supports the idea of deliberate practice. This research has been duplicated in many different domains including, music, mathematics, swimming, and other sports (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Romer, 1993). This early specialization theory advocates for the 10-year rule (Ericsson et al., 1993). This rule states that in order to achieve a level of expertise in a given task, one must be dedicated to ten years of deliberate practice in which skill acquisition is the goal (Gladwell, 2008). Another view of the early specialization theory is that children must begin specializing earlier, for if they don’t, they will never be able to catch up to peers who began at an early age (Hyman, 2009). This view has been observed in society by the increasingly younger ages in which organized sports are being offered (Farray, 2008).

The theory of early diversification of sports experiences has been supported by research (Baker et al., 2009; Gulbin et al., 2010). This early diversification is exemplified by a loose structure in which there is little emphasis on skill development and competition, and more focus on a “play-like” atmosphere.
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(Baker, 2003). This approach has been endorsed by the American Academy of Pediatrics (Brenner, 2016) as a way to improve children’s spontaneity and creativity. In support of this theory, the French have taken a targeted approach with their youth soccer players (Farray, 2008). While they seek out the talented youth in the country, their daily routine is based on unstructured play with limited skill development exercises. This routine becomes more focused and competition-centered once the children reach approximately 15 years old. This relaxed environment has allowed the children to experience spontaneity and creativity on their own and has raised the level of their professional play. In contrast, the American approach has been focused on skill development and early competitions. While this approach has produced athletes who are physically superior and able to execute plays, the Americans struggle to compete at the same level as the French. This is just one example of how the low-stakes upbringing of the French children has created an atmosphere in which they are capable of learning the fluidity and uncertainty of the game. Although early diversification seems counterproductive to achieving elite status in a given sport, one has to wonder if a holistic approach to sports would not only heighten the athleticism of the youth but would also produce life-long health benefits (Vaeyens et al., 2009).

Early Specialization - A Closer Look

In recent years, there has been significant coverage of athletes who have specialized in their sport at a very young age and achieved greatness (Wiersma, 2000). Such athletes include Simone Biles, Dominique Moceanu, Tara Lipinski and who could forget, Tiger Woods and Justin Rose. These individuals have been focused on their sport for many years and have made the world stage. Deliberately practicing their sport over the course of a decade has allowed these individuals to develop a proficiency in their skill set that is unparalleled. The focused practices and constant feedback from coaches throughout a child’s early efforts in a sport helps to fine-tune motor skills and decision-making relevant to their sport of choice (Wiersma, 2000). Early mastery of these sport-specific skills can bring about success for the child and perpetuate their involvement, but failure to master these skills can foster frustration and potential dropout (Wall & Cote, 2007).
Successful athletes have sparked a rise in youth sports teams, youth championships, and an incredible market for coaches and sports equipment companies (Hyman, 2012). There is no doubt that the youth sports industry has exploded recently and does not look to be slowing down any time soon (Gregory, 2017, Aug 24). Coaches are pressuring their athletes to specialize (Hastings, 2012) and parents are enrolling their young children in youth leagues, travel teams, and personal coaches to improve their chances at the ever-elusive college scholarship or even professional contract (Woods, 2014, Dec 15). In recent history, including the surge of youth sporting opportunities, there has also been an increase in the value of scholarships in college (Berkowitz, 2015, Jan 17). It is estimated that athletic scholarship money has grown five- or six-fold since the early 1990’s (Thompson & Dougherty, 2016). This dramatic increase offers a glimmer of hope for aspiring parents across the country who are looking for their son or daughter to enroll in college for free. Seeing this commitment by the NCAA to provide further opportunities for student-athletes to pursue a college degree is encouraging, but one must realize that among the millions of youth playing sports across the country, only approximately three percent earn an athletic scholarship (Sullivan, 2015, Jan. 16). This small chance of earning athletic scholarship dollars promotes the rush to specialize children to improve their odds.

Despite the increase in youth sports opportunities, there is still a 35 percent dropout rate among all sports (Fraser-Thomas, Deakin, & Deakin, 2008). Reasons for dropping out include a lack of enjoyment, burnout, a negative experience, and coach conflicts (Fraser-Thomas et. al, 2008). While early specialization can be beneficial due to the focused and expedited acquisition of motor skills in a particular sport, burnout and an increased propensity to injury due to over-training can hinder a child’s sports experience (Baker, 2003). Although motor skills can be developed at a much quicker pace with the early specialization model, there is also some evidence for a lack of overall motor development for these athletes (Baker, 2003). This is due to the narrow scope of movement skills that a child is learning as opposed to the wide range of skills learned through a variety of sports.
The lack of an enjoyable experience and the added stress of hours of deliberate practice can certainly take a toll on children (Malina, 2010). One prime example of this toll is the story of Richie Prunesti, a young hockey player who was so invested in hockey that his father would spend every last penny he had to make sure his son had every opportunity to succeed (Thompson & Dougherty, 2016). This intense exposure to hockey built Richie into one of the best players in the New York area. He played on travel teams to find better competition and traveled the country in tournaments. Eventually, his passion for the sport evaporated and he quit during a tryout in Michigan. He missed his friends, he was physically and mentally tired and found a way out. Richie is just one case of a child whose love for the game was destroyed by specializing too quickly and not having the opportunity to enjoy his time in sports.

**Early Diversification - A Closer Look**

The “good ol’ days”, a time when children were found in a gymnasium, on a diamond, or in a field playing with one another, without adult coaches, are looked on fondly by the adult generation and, inevitably, the question arises as to what happened to those days? The answer is simple, adults happened. Adults have slowly invaded youth sports and started building miniature professional athletes (Hyman, 2009). As a result, more and more youth leave sports all together (Wall & Cote, 2007), and there is an increasingly high burden being placed on adults to afford to involve their children in sports (Gregory, 2017, Aug 24).

In looking at the early diversification theory, one can see many of the benefits right away. By reducing the number of competitions and encouraging children to have fun in sports, overall enjoyment improves, motor skills improve, creativity increases, and there is a heightened intrinsic motivation for those children who sample many sports through a diverse sport experience (Baker, 2003). These areas of development can have a dramatic effect on whether or not a child chooses to continue in sports, not just as a competitor, but as a life-long sports enthusiast. To this end, providing children with ample opportunities to enjoy sports will improve their likelihood of continuing sports beyond competitions and increase the chances of a healthy generation. As evident by the increasing obesity rates among the country’s youth, a
continued active lifestyle through a diverse sports experience is imperative to producing a healthier generation (Van Staveren & Dale, 2004).

Diversification of sports experience for youth provides many opportunities for children. The influx of youth participation will help to dilute the talent of children and provide a more even experience for all. A peripheral benefit to increased participation of children is the reduced need to travel extensive distances for competitions. As stated in the book, *Game On* (Farray, 2008), when keeping the pool of potential athletes as large as possible for as long as possible, the best players will rise to the top in time for college or professional sports. Taking the route of diversification keeps this pool large in many sports for a long period of time and allows children to find which sport they truly enjoy and want to specialize at a later time.

There are many great benefits and opportunities to diversifying a child’s youth sports experience, but potential obstacles still exist. Perhaps one of the biggest obstacles is simply cost. With a limited number of youth teams, qualified coaches, and event workers, increasing the size of the youth sports league would produce a strain on already scarce resources. In order to meet the needs of the increased number of children in a given sport, more coaches will need to be trained, more space will be needed in which to practice or host games for the children, and finding volunteers or other event workers for the games or tournaments could put a strain on the budget for each league.

**Concerns with Early Sport Specialization**

**Burnout – “I Don’t Want to Anymore”**

Burnout, or loss of desire to continue the pursuit of an activity is becoming a concern in the specialization of sports (Reed, 2015). When young athletes withdraw from a sport it is often because they believe it is impossible to meet the physical and psychological expectations of the sport, often times established by the parents, coaches, or organization administrators (Barton Straus, 2015).

There are three main explanations why athletes eventually burn out. One is the constant feeling of needing to be successful (Cox, 2002). Gone are the days where athletes are pushed to give everything.
they have and leave it on the field. Today, it seems that every detail of their performance is scrutinized to ensure that the next competition results in a win. Another explanation is that athletes begin to feel like their sport is all work and no play (Cox, 2002). People tend to avoid what they do not enjoy. Young athletes are no different. If pushed too far they will eventually burn out and leave the sport all together. The third explanation is that young athletes feel they are merely being too controlled (Cox, 2002).

How can coaches of youth athletes recognize when an athlete is on the verge of burning out? Some physical keys to look for are tension, fatigue, irritability, and loss of energy (Fender, 1989). These are signs that any adult should be able to recognize, as they are likely to be displayed when athletes are competing in their sport. One might also watch for changes in behavior such as, depression, anger, or if an athlete displays a feeling that his or her role on the team is insignificant (Fender, 1989). While some of the signs listed above can be associated with other aspects of growing up, coaches need to be diligent in looking for the signs in order to hopefully prevent burn out before it starts.

The symptoms of burnout will present themselves if coaches know what to look for. The question is, will they be able to see the signs and take the appropriate steps to prevent burnout? One thing parents can do if they see early signs of burnout, is to cut back on the time their athlete is participating in the sport. That seems simple enough, but when considering the immense amount of pressure to stay “caught up,” it can be one of the hardest things to do. It might help to enroll the athlete in another activity as this will keep them active and will help further development other non-sport specific skills required to remain competitive.

Teaching young athletes how to manage stress levels can also help deter burnout (Cresswell & Eklund, 2003). If young athletes are able to manage the pressures that are common to their sport, it will improve their longevity in athletics. Allowing athletes to be engaged in decisions regarding their involvement in activities gives them more control (Cresswell & Eklund, 2003). When athletes have some control, they have more say about how the pressure affects them and where the pressure is coming from. If an athlete is aware of the financial and time investment required to participate, and is uncomfortable
with those aspects, it may add pressure to be successful, thus removing the enjoyment from participating. Giving athletes control, or at the very least, allowing their opinion, can help alleviate some of that pressure.

Injuries – “Ouch!”

Injuries are a common occurrence in athletics and happen at all levels, ranging from youth to professional (DeHaven & Lintner, 1986). Even noncontact sports such as golf and tennis can cause wear and tear on athletes and eventually lead to an injury (McHardy & Pollard, 2005; Pluim, Staal, Windler & Jayanthi, 2006). Sport related injuries are simply not preventable, but the risks can be reduced (Bahr & Krosshaug, 2005).

McGuine, et al. (2017) concluded that athletes who specialized in a sport had an injury rate of 46%, while athletes who did not specialize had an injury rate of 24%. They also reported that when an athlete chooses to specialize, even at the high school level, they are doubling their chances of becoming injured. The most prominent of the injuries were to the ankles and knees and were most commonly ligament sprains and muscle and tendon strains. And finally, McGuine, et al. (2017) reported that athletes who simultaneously took part in a club or travel sport, while playing for a school team, increased their risk of sustaining a lower-extremity injury.

The win at all costs mentality surrounding youth sports becomes a scary proposition when considering that parents may be setting their children up for injuries later in their careers. Children develop at a fast pace and when the same parts of the body are used repeatedly, while others are ignored, the door to problems is left wide open.

Choice – “What am I Really Good At?”

Parents who choose to live vicariously through their children can often be pushy and demanding (Brummelman, et al., 2013). Sometimes they can even be pushing their athlete the wrong direction. When intense training schedules close down opportunities for individual play, youngsters are missing the chance to explore and find out what they are not only truly good at, but what they are passionate about.
Parents do not need to be completely removed from the equation, but understanding their athlete and what is truly best for them needs to be kept in perspective.

Some youth athletes love competition and others are uncomfortable at the thought of so much riding on a sporting event. Parents need to let their children be children, whether that means their children want to be pushed and involved in a single sport or multiple sports. Some young athletes may want to participate simply for the fun of being with their friends and classmates and some may not want to be involved at all. Whatever the case, parents must recognize what their children want and listen to them in order to help them become successful in whatever they choose to be a part of.

Conclusion

Youth sports, a place of excitement, learning, and fun; or at least that’s the way it used to be, before adults starting living vicariously through their children. The youth sports explosion during the past couple of decades has seen many children in the spotlight of athletic achievement, but has society failed the average child in pursuit of the exceptional? Although there are many successful professional athletes who have specialized in their sport from a young age, far more had a childhood packed with many different sports and activities (Soberlak & Cote, 2003). Despite this fact, more and more elite, travel, and tournament teams are being created to celebrate the few who are exceptional while leaving the average child to figure out a life without sports. The current structure of youth sports is creating generations of inactive adults who perpetuate the cycle of living vicariously through children.

Burnout, overuse injuries, and taking away the opportunity for youngsters to discover their passion are all risks associated with youth sport specialization. Creating a positive environment and empowering young athletes can create experiences that will keep them enthusiastically involved. Through an understanding of the risks of sport specialization, and how to recognize, as well as prevent them, those who work in youth sports can return programs to what they should be about, developing talent in young athletes.
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