



Kids are focusing on a single sport at increasingly younger ages. Is that a problem? Studies have found that scaling back the focus on a single sport at early ages could lead to better results down the road.

As he wraps up a session with his personal trainer, John hurries to the car and quickly hops in to make it to training on time.

With the car stopped at a red light, he glances at his coach's practice notes and eats a spoonful of Greek yogurt — just a few berries on top because he's focusing on his fitness. When the car finally pulls up to the soccer field, he grabs his gear from the trunk and hurries to join the rest of the team.

Before he can get 10 steps from the car, he hears someone shout his name. John hastily turns around and jogs back to the car, where he gives his mom a kiss before she reminds him to ask coach for an excusal note for the upcoming tournament to give to his fifth-grade teacher.

That scene may sound extreme, but it's becoming far too common for children's dreams of being professional athletes to become a reality before they even reach their teens. Kids are beginning to specialize in one sport with the end goal of earning a college scholarship and hopefully playing professionally.

The year-round focus on a single sport forces kids to drop any other athletic pursuits they may enjoy in order to master their "main sport." And the most startling thing is the decisions that shape their childhood and youth sports careers often aren't made by the kids.

WHERE DID SPECIALIZATION COME FROM?

Many people contribute the rise of early sport specialization to the popularity of a theory by Dr. Anders Ericsson, which said it takes 10,000 hours of deliberate practice to become an expert. With that rule in mind, youth athletes have started to focus on one sport in hopes of reaching an elite level by high school and college — even though Ericsson’s original work was intended for musicians, mathematicians and chess players, rather than athletes.

An [article by Brad Ferguson and Paula Stern](#), of the Canadian Memorial Chiropractic College, said before the age of 10, kids are “typically not psychologically mature to understand the importance, responsibility, commitment and ramifications of year round training in sport.” Instead, they found coaches are often first to see a young player as gifted and recommend specialization in a single sport.

But before coaches or parents accept Ericsson’s theory as fact, [Dr. Matt Bowers](#) suggests they think of all possible outcomes of specialization.

“Think about playing a piano. If you had your kid playing the same note on the piano for 10,000 hours, that’s not necessarily going to make him or her an expert in playing the piano,” Bowers said. “That’s the worry with specialization — if you are so focused from a young age, it’s going to lead to some potential complications later on. Burnout leading to dropout, potentially.”

US Youth Soccer Director of Coaching Sam Snow has seen the trend of youth players specializing in the sport at earlier ages. He couldn’t give an exact percentage, but Snow estimated that as many as a quarter of clubs around the country are pushing kids into specializing in soccer.

That movement comes despite the [US Youth Soccer Player Development Model](#) — which aims to increase the level of play across the country while also instilling in players a life-long passion for the game — suggesting adults who want to achieve success in youth sports suffer from “*too much too soon syndrome*.”

“It could be coaches or clubs are aware that they’re doing this incorrectly and doing it anyway in order to increase revenue streams, or it’s being done out of ignorance,” Snow said. “We have some clubs or organizations around the country that are pushing the kids and families by saying, ‘If you don’t do this now at age 7 or 8 or 9, begin to specialize in soccer and specialize in a position, that somehow or another you’ll be behind the curve.’”

SPECIALIZED SPECIALISTS

Bowers, a clinical assistant professor of kinesiology and health education at the University of Texas, has conducted research that focuses on how to develop systems and policies in youth sports to make them work better for kids and also produce better outcomes.

He said athletics in the United States are not only seeing a push for specialization into a certain sport, but also specialization within that sport — using a goalkeeper in soccer as an example. While it may seem logical to believe the more a player focuses on goalkeeping, the better keeper he or she will be, Bowers said that isn’t the case.

“In actuality,” he said, “the more we develop a broad range of soccer skills, the better the keeper is going to be.”

While it's just one specific example, recent U.S. Soccer goalkeepers have provided evidence that playing multiple positions or multiple sports can result in better performance in goal once players reach the highest level. U.S. Men's National Team goalkeeper Tim Howard grew up playing in the midfield, while U.S. Women's National Team goalkeeper Hope Solo played forward for much of her youth career.

Soccer America's Mike Voitalla wrote a [2009 article](#) that highlighted Howard, Solo, Tony Meola and Brad Guzan as four U.S. Goalkeepers who each played in the field as youth and high school soccer players, in addition to playing other sports such as basketball, volleyball and baseball.

In the Soccer America article, World Cup-winning coach Tony DiCicco said playing a variety of sports is "very good" for preteen athletes and even athletes in their early teens. DiCicco said that especially applies to goalkeepers, who can benefit from sports like basketball and baseball.

After developing a full range of soccer skills and hand-eye coordination, Howard, Solo, Meola and Guzan each became one of the best players at their position in the world. But Bowers said the tendency for teams to focus on game results rather than development makes it difficult for players to get an opportunity to try multiple positions.

"When you're focused on winning, even with a group of 8-year-olds, you tend to focus on different things," Bowers said. "You focus on gaining tactical advantages rather than emphasizing the development of the players. And when you're focused on tactics, it makes more sense to focus on players staying in specific positions."

EFFECTS ON HEALTH

As players begin specializing in a certain sport, [Dr. Jay Hertel](#), the Joe Gieck Professor in Sports Medicine at the University of Virginia, said there can be some clinical injury risks. He acknowledged baseball as a sport where year-round training can lead to arm injuries, likely due in large part to the amount of throwing specialized players experience in the course of a season.

Hertel said soccer doesn't carry as many injury risks related to overuse, but the bigger concern should be on the training volume of specialized players in the sport. He broke it down into two perspectives — how much a player trains in a given week and how much a player trains over the course of a year. He said it's important to monitor weekly training volume but also to make sure the player gets a period to rest during the year.

Snow said the stress put on a young body from high amounts of training on a week-to-week and yearly basis can lead to injury risks, in addition to the likelihood of mental fatigue and burnout.

With a 13-year-old son and 9-year-old daughter who each play soccer in addition to other sports, Hertel isn't totally dismissing the possibility of them specializing in soccer if they desired. But he said he'll exercise caution if that situation arises.

"I definitely do have concerns about overtraining. If they were to specialize, I would still want them to have an offseason and probably do something else during that time to stay fit," Hertel said. "I certainly appreciate the fact, that if they have the talents and want to pursue a sport in college, they will need to do that sport for a greater period of time than they're doing right now."

“On the other side of things, you at least want to make sure they get exposed to more than one sport because over a lifetime that’s important.”

BENEFITS OF SAMPLING

Participating in multiple sports allows athletes to work different muscles groups and have the chance to take part in both anaerobic and aerobic activities, Hertel explained. And the potential benefits playing various sports aren’t limited to health. Bowers said kids who steer away from specialization and practice sampling, a term for trying multiple sports, are less likely to fall into a troubling pattern that has developed among young adults.

“What we’ve seen in the research is that we’re turning sports into work for kids at a really young age,” Bowers said. “And that has long-term ramifications. One of the big problems in this country is that kids stop playing sports after they’re out of school.”

“We’re turning sports into work for kids at a really young age.”

- Dr. Matt Bowers

Bowers said sampling allows kids to develop better physically and psychologically, and it makes them more likely to continue playing sports beyond the youth level.

Interestingly, playing multiple sports may also produce better results that will please players, parents and potentially coaches at the highest levels. By allowing soccer players to develop physical literacy and experience different sports — while also staying in touch with soccer — Bowers said those players could see better performance at elite levels of play.

Snow echoed that thought and said kids who play multiple sports through age 13 are more likely to be tactically smart players with the ability to recognize patterns of play. However, it’s often difficult for players, parents and coaches to overlook the potential immediate results of specialization and wait for the long-term benefits of sampling — making early specialization appealing, as even untrained eyes can see quick improvement in the young athletes.

“There’s a good deal of research that shows that, in fact, athletes who participate in what is called deliberate practice — all those scheduled training sessions, the extra fitness sessions, the extra matches and tournaments — will show a short-term increase in improvement over the other kids who don’t,” Snow said. “Five years or 10 years down the road, it’s the other kids who leap past the kids who specialize too soon. All of a sudden, it’s time for college soccer and a lot of those kids who specialize too soon are emotionally and physically done. And the other kids who didn’t specialize early continue on.”

An example of a player who didn’t need to focus solely on one sport to find success is Cheyna Williams. The rising senior at Florida State was the second-leading scorer on the Seminoles’ 2014 NCAA National Champion women’s soccer team and was recently selected to play with the U.S. Under-23 Women’s National Team. But before focusing solely on soccer, Williams tried out several sports while growing up.

“I just remember when I was around 10, I actually played softball for a little while because I was tired of soccer,” Williams said. “So, I took a year or two off from soccer when I was 9 or 10 to play softball to see how much I liked that.”

Williams, who also played basketball and participated in track and field as a kid, returned to soccer and had great success at United Futbol Academy (GA) before moving on to play at soccer at Vanderbilt and Florida State.

While the idea of a 10-year-old Williams sampling different sports seems natural, it’s often difficult for adults to show the patience to allow children to realize what sports they like best. Bowers said he understands the difficulty parents face when pressured to keep their child up to speed with others who start their kids on the perceived tracks to elite levels. However, he said certain ages can only produce so much development, and parents may need to go against the grain to do what is best for their child.

“I think we’re all well-intentioned in wanting our kids to have the best opportunities possible and wanting our National Teams in soccer in the U.S. to develop as well as possible,” Bowers said. “There’s a little bit of a counter intuitive issue, where if we actually slowed them down a little bit and let them do some other things that don’t necessarily seem like the natural approach, we might actually see better results.”

COLLEGE SOCCER

A recent [report by The Aspen Institute’s Project Play](#) revealed that seven out of 10 Olympic athletes surveyed by the United States Olympic Committee said they grew up as multisport athletes, and most called it “valuable.”

Snow said it’s those types of athletes who coaches at the collegiate ranks are most interested in when looking for potential players.

“If you talk to college coaches today, and this would be college coaches of any team sports, they’ll all tell you — whether it’s a soccer coach, football coach, basketball coach, doesn’t matter — they’ll all say, ‘We want multiple sport athletes because those are the ones who perform best at the intercollegiate level,’” Snow said.

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US Youth Soccer surveyed more than 500 college soccer coaches and asked if they prefer an athlete who played multiple sports. Of the 221 Division I coaches who answered, just 16 — 7 percent — said they would prefer a player who played only soccer and was not a multi-sport athlete.

On the other hand, coaches didn’t overwhelmingly praise multi-sport athletes. Most interviewed by US Youth Soccer said it simply comes down to the players’ soccer ability — backed up by the survey’s overall results that showed 66 percent of coaches didn’t consider playing multiple sports a factor when recruiting players.

Still, there are coaches who see benefits in having a broad athletic background. Chris Watkins, associate head coach for BYU women's soccer, said in his 19 years with the Cougars, they have had great success with girls who also played basketball — the main athletic option during cold winter months. However, in his time coaching college soccer, he's seen the number of athletes who play multiple sports fade.

"Nowadays, we just rarely see it and it's really a shame," Watkins said. "We certainly would appreciate that. It would add value, as long as they can excel in soccer, of course. I think we value that as a program, for sure. More than one dimension in life is always a good thing."

The US Youth Soccer survey results did reveal that a majority of college coaches, when asked what age they prefer athletes to specialize, believe kids should wait until their teenage years to focus on one sport.

Nearly 50 percent of college coaches who answered said to wait until the sophomore, junior or senior years of high school. Another 26 percent preferred specialization in 9th grade, while 19 percent said they prefer athletes wait until after high school to focus solely on soccer. Just 8.5 percent of coaches said they would like to see players compete in only soccer during their middle school years.

It wasn't until her senior year in high school that Williams stopped participating in basketball and track, and she can see some potential benefits they may have derived from playing three sports.

"As far as track goes, I'll definitely say working on form with running helped me athletically when it came to soccer," Williams said. "Basketball, the speed of play and being able to transition on the court so quickly may have helped me with soccer."

The only player with more points than Williams on the 2014 Florida State women's soccer was Iceland native Dagny Brynjarsdottir, who, like Williams, played basketball as a youth athlete — an example of sampling that is more commonplace in Europe.

Bowers said the structure of European athletics keeps athletes in the game when they get older, as governments provide funding to keep a variety of sports and opportunities available.

Meanwhile, Snow said people often overlook the various options offered at some of Europe's top soccer clubs.

"Internally in the club, those kids are also playing in the club's basketball program and judo programming and other cross-training sports," Snow said. "It just happens to be called Ajax Football Club, but they're still doing volleyball and basketball and other things inside the club as a part of developing athleticism and avoiding burnout."

“Prior to age 12, 50 percent of training should be free play.”

- Sam Snow

THE BEST COMPROMISE

The increased specialization and competition in youth sports have made it difficult for kids to bounce from one sport to the next. Both Bowers and Hertel acknowledged that today's sports landscape may

make it necessary for athletes to specialize if they intend to play beyond high school, but each said the focus on a single sport shouldn't begin until the early teens.

In addition to Hertel's emphasis on monitoring training volume to mitigate injury risks in specialized athletes, Bowers said players, parents and coaches should also think twice about the format of training. He said informal training, such as pickup games, can be beneficial and produce increased creativity.

Snow stressed the importance of pickup games and free play among youth soccer players, saying it provides a "very healthy environment for the kids." Free play allows kids to dictate the game, while coaches simply watch from the sidelines for supervision.

If more clubs offered open free play, Snow said it would likely allow them to keep the players in the club for more years and also could end up raising the level of play of all the kids in the club.

And if kids are to specialize, free play could help keep the game fun and give players a greater chance of continuing playing soccer when they become adults. Snow believes, for young players especially, free play should be a big part of their soccer experience.

"Prior to age 12, 50 percent of training should be free play," Snow said. "Frankly, I'd like free play to be a little higher than 50 percent, but that's a good ratio to go with."

While the idea of free play sounds simple enough, coaches and parents often struggle to stay out of the game when at the field. And when managing a game turns into managing a young player's "career," it becomes even more difficult for adults to show patience.

Bowers said what seems right in adults' minds isn't always correct, and they should think twice before beginning kids on a specialized path because the way adults look at sports and the way children experience them are often different.

"If people do a little bit of digging on their own to think about what's best for their kid, I think they'll at the very least have some concerns about specialization as an approach," Bowers said. "I'm not going to tell anyone that there's only one way because there's not. I would just encourage parents to think about their kids as more than just a potential elite athlete and think about what would benefit them in a more holistic way."