

Sport Specialization: A Disturbing Trend

RIS - Summer 2005

by Kathy Toon

Multi-sport youth athletes are becoming a rarity. An increasing number of children are specializing in one sport at an early age, training year-round and competing on an "elite" level. The ever-present dream of sports success is creating constant pressure for younger and younger athletes to train longer, harder and more intelligently. Unfortunately, many parents believe the growing misperception that competitive sport requires exclusivity and that athletes who participate in one sport year-round get an edge on those who split time between multiple sports. However, research indicates that this approach could backfire.

In competitive figure skating there is a tremendous push to develop young skaters. In order to qualify for regional competition and beyond, many coaches believe that skaters need to be landing all of their double jumps, including their double Axel, by the age of 12. Coaches and parents look at Tara Lipinski, who won gold at the Olympics at age 15, and believe she must have been landing triples by the time she was 8 years old! With this kind of thinking and pressure, it's not surprising that coaches encourage their skaters to specialize very early.

While child development researchers believe it is never too early for children to participate in a wide range of sport activities, they caution that participation in organized athletic competition should generally not begin before the age of 8. Researchers believe that, by age 8, children are psychologically mature enough to accept coaching and are physically mature enough to participate in sports with a minimal risk of injury. The emphasis for sports participation at the youth level should be on skill development and fun, not on intense competition. Researchers have suggested 13 as the age at which most children can cope with, and benefit from, more intense competition.

Researchers caution parents and coaches against pressuring children into specializing in one sport at an early age. Anecdotal reports suggest risks of "burnout" from physical and emotional stress, missed social and educational opportunities, and disruptions of family life. Unfortunately, the lure of national and Olympic success can motivate athletes and their parents to commit to specialized training programs too early. The low probability of reaching this lofty goal does not appear to discourage many aspirants.

Research by Tudor Bompa, a leading expert in the theory of training and coaching, recommends that athletes avoid early sports specialization. He found that those who participate in a variety of sports and specialize only after reaching the age of puberty tend to be more consistent performers, have fewer injuries and adhere to sports longer than those who specialize early.

So what are parents to do? Talk with your children. Find out if the decision to specialize is theirs or the coach's. If your children are in middle school or older and want to focus solely on skating, then no problem. If they want to continue doing multiple sports yet feel pressure from a coach to specialize, talk it through. Remind them that playing team sports like basketball or soccer can build leg muscles as well as give them a break from the rink. Consider suggesting ballet, dance or other related classes - these can be a great supplement to any skating program.

The Positive Coaching Alliance advocates that the decision to specialize be made by the athletes themselves, free from parental or coaching pressure. At some point athletes may consider specializing in one sport and curbing or dropping their participation in others. This is not a bad thing,

and it can even be a good thing. But the impetus should come from the player, not parental or coaching pressure. Coaches and parents should provide valuable guidance and perspective, and ultimately let the child decide.

Bottom line: Kids get a great deal out of playing more than one sport and participating in activities outside of sports. It should be entirely up to them as to whether or not they wish to specialize, and when.

Kathy Toon is a senior trainer and the product development manager for Positive Coaching Alliance. To learn more about the ISI-PCA partnership or bringing the benefits of a PCA programs to your community, visit PositiveCoach.org.