

Should My Child Play Multiple Sports?

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There are many examples of professional athletes who played more than one sport while growing up. These individuals were able to get to the top of their game without specializing at an early age. Many high school and college coaches believe that it is absolutely a good idea to participate in multiple sports. The former University of Southern California football coach Pete Carroll said, "I want guys that are so special athletically, and so competitive that they can compete in more than one sport." In his opinion, this makes them a more valuable recruit. Again and again, you'll hear collegiate coaches stress the importance of athletic versatility, especially when looking at how to award and divide scholarships. An athlete who is talented in more than one arena becomes a better recruiting prospect.

In contrast, I am finding that more and more parents and coaches feel the need for young athletes to specialize in one sport in order to give their child an advantage over the competition. Although coaches and parents see immediate results in the player's skill development in those who follow this path, in the long run quite the opposite might be true. And in some cases, specialization may actually be detrimental to an athlete's long-term success. Playing multiple sports can give an athlete the opportunity to develop a broad range of skills as opposed to the narrow skill set that is cultivated through single sport specialization.

In soccer, often we talk about how many "touches on the ball" a player can get in practice or over the course of a season. Whether we mean to or not, language like this can encourage players to specialize at earlier and earlier ages. After all, spending time away from your sport of choice may affect your stats. Coaches and parents will talk about the importance of being on the top team in the gold division, Classic 1 or Premier. With such lofty goals, it is easy to dismiss the benefits of multi-sport play, but to do so would be remiss as skills do transfer from sport to sport. For example, volleyball and basketball require lateral movement, hand-eye coordination, ball skills and vertical jumping. There is a transfer between blocking a ball and contesting a shot, between moving laterally for a dig and moving laterally to prevent an offensive player's penetration.

As a parent, it's easy to fall into the mindset that your child needs to devote twelve months a year to soccer since the story often told is that the most skilled 10-year-old plays soccer year-round. However, athletic development is a process, and skill development is only one piece. Each sport uses some muscles more than others. When an athlete gets in an awkward position, other sport muscles may kick in. Using general skills, a good athlete can adjust to the situation. I know that I benefited from being in different competitive situations and that my time playing baseball and hockey, as well as competing in track and field, all contributed to my personal success as a soccer player.

People encourage early specialization because of the immediate performance gains. However, before one can be great at any sport, he or she must be an athlete first, and early specialization impedes overall athletic development. Kids used to develop these broad athletic skills by playing multiple sports and neighborhood games, like tag or dodge ball, which develop agility, balance, coordination, evading skills, body control and more. But in the past decade or so, there has been a major cultural shift. Now, rather than playing tag in their neighborhood, kids participate in a structured team practice where they do agility drills so they can change directions, fake, evade and cut when they play basketball, soccer or football. We impose professional training environments on kids before puberty and ignore their differing developmental needs. This is why the games and activities approach (in other words, *no drills*) is so important with our younger kids. Essentially, these games mimic the neighborhood and playground games that the current generation lacks as an integral part of their development. The focus here is child development, not necessarily skill development, and when the child has a chance to grow, some measure of skill development will naturally follow.

Player development is a process that takes time and patience and early specialization attempts to speed the process. We must ask, *for what purpose?* Is the goal to dominate as a 10-year-old? Keep in mind that early specialization leads to early peaks. Specialized players improve their specific skills more rapidly than those who participate in a wide range of activities. On the other hand, those who develop deeper and broader athletic skills through cross training have a better foundation when they ultimately specialize. While those who specialized early tend to hit a plateau, those who diversify their athletic involvement typically improve on a continuous curve as they dedicate more time to honing their skills and to understanding how movements in one sport can inform and enhance performance in another.

If players specialize in soccer at 10-years-old, their general athletic development will inevitably be one dimensional, and thus incomplete. While they will likely improve their dribbling, agility and understanding of the game more rapidly than their peers who play multiple sports, those who play multiple sports develop many other athletic skills which will inform their play in a way that specialized players may not be able to attain. If others play basketball, they improve their vision, shooting, footwork and more. If they play football, they'll develop different skills depending on position, but overall it is safe to say that they would see improvement in acceleration and power. When these cross-trained athletes choose to specialize in soccer in their later teens, they bring these skill sets with them. With their broad athletic experiences, they will often have an advantage over the player who specialized in soccer at the age of ten and consequently has a very unilateral experience in sports.

For the sake of our kids' development and athletic growth, I challenge you to incorporate diversity into your child's play. Remember that specializing at too young an age is wholly unnecessary and in some cases detrimental to an athlete's long-term success. If the goal is to dominate other 10-year-olds, specialize early. However, if the goal is to nurture healthy children and to give them an opportunity to participate in high school and/or college athletics, then diversity is key. Encourage them to play in multiple sports, competitively or not, and while you're at it, why not bring back a good old game of tag?