

Benefits of Multiple-sport Participation Outweigh Sport Specialization

BY MATTHEW R. SHOMPER, CMAA

There are many benefits for students who participate in co-curricular activities, which are inherently educational and support the academic mission of our schools.

Activities teach students lessons that lead to being better citizens, and they foster success for students in later life. Students who participate in school activities make higher grades and have better attendance than the average student. Participating students also have fewer discipline issues at school, are more likely to attend college and less likely to drop out of school.

Given all of these benefits, students need to be involved in school activities! However, changes in society have led to the expansion of “travel ball” and sport specialization. School programs are being devalued and students are dropping out of sports at an alarming rate, which has led to concern regarding the future of high school athletics.

Students participate in sports for a variety of reasons, according to a recent survey. The top five reasons are to have fun, to do something they are good at, to stay in shape, to learn new or improve current skills and to play as part of a team. Interestingly, “to win” was ranked eighth.

Despite these tremendous benefits of participating in sports, a number of students are dropping out of sports each year. The reasons given were no longer interested in sports, no longer having fun, problems with coaches, financial concerns, wanting to do something different and sport specialization.

Sport specialization is defined as limiting athletic participation to one sport, where students practice, train and compete solely in that sport year-round. Specialization has increased significantly in the past 15 years, championed on the national level by golfing and tennis greats Tiger Woods, Andre Agassi, Serena Williams and Venus Williams.

Why do students choose to specialize? The biggest reason is parents. Many parents encourage specialization because they believe it is an investment in a future scholarship. Students also specialize because of professional aspirations and the revenue that

comes with being a professional, and to win the “national championship” with their AAU, Junior Olympics or travel team.

There are many other reasons that students choose to specialize – early college recruiting, pressure from coaches (if you work at it, you’ll get to play or even start), weather/geography, socioeconomic factors, sport commercialization, increased pressure and opportunity to play with private club and travel teams, and the general influence of society that wants youth to be a productive age instead of an experimentation age.

Parents and students who choose to specialize believe that specialization increases the chance for college scholarships. Students think they will be able to develop their skills in that sport because of the increased practice time. Parents and students feel that specializing is needed in order to keep up with others, and it satisfies the student’s desire to achieve excellence in their sport. Some view specialization as a way for a marginal player to make the varsity team. They also feel that specialization is a great way to avoid injury in another sport.

What about being a multiple-sport athlete? There are many great athletes who were multiple-sport participants, and at a high level. Just to name a few – Hakeem Olajuwon, Carl Crawford, John Elway, Dave Winfield, Jackie Robinson, Babe Didrikson, Jim Brown, Deion Sanders, Bo Jackson, Jim Thorpe, Tom Brady, Dan Marino, Donovan McNabb, Terrell Owens, Joe Mauer, LeBron James, Roger Federer, Alex Rodriguez, and the list goes on and on. With all of these multi-million dollar athletes being multi-sport participants, it’s hard to argue against it.

Benefits of Participating in Multiple Sports

So, what are the benefits of being a multiple-sport participant? **Improved health and wellness is one of the benefits.** Students who participate in more than one sport have reduced risk of over-use injuries and stress that leads to burnout. There are many health benefits to varied physical activity.

Multiple-sport students also show improved athletic performance. Cross-training (using different muscles and skills) leads to better athleticism, better leadership and teamwork skills, and better mental development, and makes it easier for multiple-sport students to pick on new skills.

Being involved in more sports leads to character development as well. Students may not excel in all of their sports, so they learn humility and teamwork. They also learn from the different coaching styles and personalities in the different sports.

Multiple-sport participation also provides improved coaching. School coaches understand that there is more to teaching our students than just the sport. Being with our school coaches is better for our students than being with a select or travel coach who may not worry about teaching life lessons. There are many CEOs of major companies who believe that hiring a person who was a multiple-sport participant is important because people who do multiple things are capable of handling different situations.

With regard to scholarships, most college coaches prefer the multiple-sport athlete because he or she is “ready to go,” and not likely to be burned out. He or she is usually more adaptable, less concerned with being a star and has better crossover skills.

Following are some things to consider when making the decision to specialize or play multiple sports:

1. Weight room and off-season conditioning is not a substitute for competition.
2. Specialization often conflicts with the educational mission of schools, where the goal should be to provide athletic programs that lead to the greatest personal growth.
3. There is little to suggest that specialization makes an athlete better at a sport. Yes, there are examples, but there are just as many “latecomer” examples as well.
4. When a student specializes, it is not what he or she is gaining, it is more about what a student is losing – the socialization with a slightly different peer group, a different coaching model and seeing things in a different context than if the individual played a variety of sports each year.
5. While this generation of athletes may become highly competent in a certain range of skills, a growing number lack the balance that diverse exposure to sports and other activities have traditionally offered.
6. With pressure to succeed hinging on one sport, the consequent anxiety often leads to burnout.
7. Playing sports in high school provides the best opportunity to learn time management in preparation for college and life after college.
8. Evidence shows that those who specialize in sports at a young age are less likely to be physically active as adults.

Some of the common arguments against sport specialization are:

- overuse injuries,
- burnout,
- dilutes the talent pool in schools,
- denies students meaningful contact with other coaches and students,
- denies students transferable skills,
- students might not discover their best sport, and
- may pit athletes vs. coaches and/or coaches vs. coaches.

The more frequently mentioned arguments for multiple-sport participation are:

- develops multiple identities,
- cushions against failure,
- reduces overuse injuries and burnout,
- positive skill transfer,
- sports sampling provides more options for later sport activity,
- positive values,
- reduces stress, and
- FUN!!

How do we reverse the trend and get students to value being a multiple-sport participant? First, school leaders must educate parents and students about the benefits of being involved in multiple sports and the drawbacks to specialization; then hire coaches with a similar philosophy and who coach multiple sports.

Multiple-sport athletes should be honored with special awards and recognitions, and multiple-sport participation should be promoted in athletic handbooks and publications. Students should be encouraged to develop diversified lifestyles.

Off-season workouts and camps should be scheduled so that students are not forced to choose one over the other. Students need to be reminded that they get only one shot at high school and they need to make the most of that opportunity by being involved in as many school activities as possible.

Interscholastic sports promote citizenship and sportsmanship. They instill a sense of pride in community and teach lifelong lessons of teamwork and self-discipline. Interscholastic sports facilitate the physical and emotional development of our nation’s youth. Students and parents need to be educated on the benefits of our programs and multiple activity participation, and students will greatly benefit from multiple-sport participation through interscholastic athletic programs. ☉

Matthew Shomper is athletic director of Tiptecanoe High School in Tipp City, Ohio.