



## President's Advisory

### Sport Specialization

As the sport federation for Prince Edward Island, Sport PEI receives many inquiries from the general public regarding sporting issues. Specialization, in one sport at what age, is a topic which seems to be at the forefront of people's minds.

Those of us involved in sport hold true to our conviction that there are many benefits from participating in sport, such as skill development, teamwork, and physical fitness. We also want to ensure our young athletes have the opportunity to achieve the best possible success in sport. However, a common trend in recent years has seen many parents, coaches, and athletes feeling the pressure for youth sport participants to specialize in order to be successful. Does specialization provide the expected benefits or could it be harmful in the long run?

For the purposes of this discussion, we are defining specialization as **year-round involvement of young athletes, in one particular sport, at the exclusion of playing multiple sports.** *The young athlete is being defined as being not older than 12 years of age.*

#### **Arguments for Specialization**

Why specialize? The perception is that becoming an elite/high performance or professional athlete can only be achieved by specialization in one sport. Sometimes it is difficult to argue that point when athletes like Wayne Gretzky and Tiger Woods are used as examples. Parents often see a "special talent" within their child and some push them to excel by having the child train and compete in that sport almost 12 months of the year, most days of the week. But will it work?

#### **Arguments Against Specialization**

While it is difficult to refute the successes of some professional or Olympic athletes, the literature suggests that the arguments against early specialization are too numerous to ignore.

The ***American Academy of Pediatrics*** (AAP) made the following recommendation in a year 2000 policy report.

"Children involved in sports should be encouraged to participate in a variety of different activities and develop a wide range of skills. Young athletes who

specialize in just one sport may be denied the benefits of varied activity while facing additional physical, physiological, and psychological demands from intense training and competition.”

The report also stated 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 play longer than those who specialize early.”

The AAP theme of multi-sport participation and the development of a foundation of athletic skills is reiterated by many authors.

Dr. Istvan Balyi, in “Sport System Building and Long-term Athlete Development in British Columbia” (2001) suggests that prior to age ten, the emphasis should be on the overall development of the athlete’s physical capacities, and fundamental movement skills; and that the introduction of the ABC’s of athleticism (agility, balance, coordination, speed) during the period of 9-12 years will lay the foundation of athletic excellence for later years.

Balyi also recommends that between ages 6-10 (male and female), if athletes and parents have a preferred sport, participation once or twice per week is recommended, but participation in other sports three or four times per week is essential for future excellence. If the athletes later decide to leave the competitive stream, the skills they have acquired during the fundamental stage will still benefit them when they engage in recreational activities, which will enhance their quality of life and health.

Before the teenage years, parents can help maximize the chances of their children succeeding in a range of sports by allowing them to participate in activities that have:

- an aerobic or endurance component (such as running, swimming, hiking, cycling, rowing, dancing)
- a motor-skill or coordination component (such as hitting, kicking, throwing catching sports, gymnastics)
- a social or interactive component (such as team-based sports)

With the exception of some sports, a broad sporting focus rather than a narrow one is preferable for attaining sporting excellence. It is recognized that some sports may require early specialization and sport specific training, such as gymnastics, figure skating and diving. However, most sports would fall into a late specialization model. Sports such as athletics, combative sports, cycling, racquet sports, rowing and all team sports require a generalized approach to early training. In these sports, the emphasis of training should be on the development of general, fundamental motor and technical-tactical skills.

Another argument against specialization is that too early specialization often results in “burn out” of the child before prime competitive age, drop out and retirement from training and competition.

### **Position of Sport PEI**

It is Sport PEI’s recommendaton, based on the literature, that sport specialization should be delayed until a child reaches puberty (approximately 12 years). It is Sport PEI’s philosophy that young athletes need to develop the fundamental skills which will allow Island athletes to maximize their athletic potential and create lifelong participation. It is also our belief that young athletes need to participate in a variety of sports to create well-balanced, successful athlete.

## **References**

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