

The Benefits of Not Specializing

By Jim Meier

Cal and Bill Ripken have discussed the concept of allowing young athletes to play more than one sport instead of focusing strictly on baseball. As someone who's involved with the mental side of athletics, I couldn't agree more.

Here's why:

- Increased athleticism
- Better overall physical development
- The variety lessens the likelihood of mental burnout
- More friends broaden social contacts and skills

These arguments in favor of branching out simply make good sense to me. However, there are even deeper reasons for not specializing that impact lifetime learning and development, reasons that might actually increase rather than decrease the odds of playing at higher levels. Let me explain.

There are four key points I'd like to reference supporting the concept of participating in more than one sport:

Brain development

My wife, Cindy, is a licensed mental health counselor specializing in children. She also teaches college courses in psychology and human growth and learning. For those reasons, I went directly to her first to ask her for input.

Essentially she said that in middle childhood, ages 6-12, children are able through repetition to make certain behaviors automatic because of brain maturation. For this to occur, signals between one part of the brain and another travel more quickly. Practicing any particular skill allows processing in the brain to take place faster and more efficiently until the skill is automatic. Thus, if a child practices baseball or softball, the motor skills necessary to complete the actions required by those sports become automatic.

By allowing children in that age group to play a variety of sports, their reactions in each of those sports become quicker and more automatic. Cindy said: "It is important, in my opinion, to let children create the neural passageways for a wide variety of sports and activities during middle childhood so they have a choice of what sport to play when deciding to specialize in the teen years." She has experienced this firsthand by having raised three children who played multiple sports throughout high school.

Attention should be placed on the word QUICKNESS. For most positions in most sports, quickness is more important than speed. Through my work in sports psychology I have developed the motto, "As I Think, So I Play."

That could be clarified even further to say, "As I think quickly, so I execute quickly." After all, the brain does activate the action.

Note: There is much study and research available on this topic. Try searching for human growth and development on the Internet.

Personal example of brain development

In my case, at age 60, I can still ride a bike, shoot hoops, swing a bat, throw a ball, hit golf shots, catch a pass, shoot a puck, shoot pool and pitch a horseshoe without having to process these skills through conscious thought. These skills, since they were developed early, went straight to my subconscious, the storehouse of habit, the home of long-term muscle memory and the strongest part of the mind. In technical terms this is called procedural memorization vs. rote memorization.

On the other hand, three sports examples of rote memorization for me are:

- 1) First-time downhill skiing in my mid-20s. The learning process required so much more thought and mechanical repetition (not to mention overcoming anxiety and comfort-zone issues).
- 2) Learning to swim in my later 20's. There was nothing free and easy about that. It took a lot longer to become reasonably okay in the water.
- 3) First waterskiing adventures in my early 40's. The only thing fluid about that experience was the amount of water that I took in after repeated falls.

The overall point that I'm trying to make is that I am much more skilled at those sports I learned at an early age. A high percentage of other people would say the same thing. It's similar to learning a language; if you pick up a second language early in life, learning subsequent languages becomes much easier. That part of the brain has been massaged, nurtured and developed to absorb new and unusual words and sentence structures.

What college and high school coaches say

For this article I called several trusted and seasoned college and high school coaches, asking a few unbiased questions about this topic. Guess what? Each one said that they had more players on their teams who were multiple-sport athletes at an early age than who were single-sport athletes. They talked not only about the fact that these athletes possessed increased athleticism, but also they cited their well-developed mental understanding of the sport.

The multi-sport athletes seemed to see the field or court better, to be more able to adapt to and understand various strategies, and showed an increased ability to handle game tension because of the variety and number of their previous competitive experiences. This certainly indicates that if the athlete's plan is to play at higher levels, the odds may in fact increase if he or she avoids specializing at too young an age. The consensus among those who I spoke with was that there is no real reason to choose a single sport until the junior year of high school. In other words, if a young athlete has the will and ability to play on several high school teams, by all means he or she should do it. The athlete will be better off in the long and short terms.

A cautionary word: There is more and more pressure placed on the young athletes by select team and high school coaches to choose one sport. At the high school level I've heard examples in which some coaches actually battle with each other over this issue and make it difficult for the athlete. The goal should be to keep the best interest of the student-athlete's overall development in mind and help manage the big picture for that particular person.

Life after sports

Eventually the spikes and glove are hung up and the bat is placed in safe keeping for the next generation. At that point, the more knowledge, skills and experience that someone has stored up to draw upon for life's next chapter, the better off he or she will be. This is a critical point to understand.

In my work with sports teams and corporations, I teach, coach and write about innovative and creative skills. This breaks down into 18 characteristics. Sports participation helps develop all 18. And the more sports someone participates in, the wider and deeper that development will go. A few of the characteristics sports participation helps develop include: expanded background of knowledge; curiosity; originality; analysis and problem solving; flexibility; self-confidence and risk; persistence and concentration; and thinking in images. As I mentioned earlier, it is better to participate in a variety of sports earlier in life when the brain can absorb more and more easily process the information it receives into the subconscious through high-speed passageways.

I do recognize the reality of managing time constraints for the athlete and parents as well as participating in and enjoying other activities beyond sports. Nonetheless, I remain grateful that my children tried many different activities.

A few closing thoughts and questions:

- The choice of which sports to participate in should be made by the young athlete.
- Parents should guide those choices and establish limits within their means without making the ultimate decision. The child should be self-motivated.
- Coaches should look in the mirror and determine why they really are coaching.
- Parents should do the same and ask themselves why they want their kids involved in sports.
- Parents also should ask themselves, "If I think my child is good enough for the Olympics, do I want to push him or her in that direction?"

Note: I don't lean one way or the other here, but I do believe the tradeoffs need to be understood and weighed with an open mind.

To all you who have read this, I wish you happiness and success. I also sincerely thank you for your dedication to developing young athletes and young minds!

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