

# 3 Myths that are Destroying the Youth Sports Experience for our Kids

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Every year, I travel throughout the US, Canada, Asia and Europe, and give well over 100 presentations to parents and coaches. I speak to tens of thousands of people about youth sports, coaching, and athlete development. Every time I do a live event, I get asked the following question:

“If you are presenting all this science based evidence about how to raise happy, healthy and high-performing athletes, why don’t most coaches, clubs, schools and parents follow these protocols? Why do I see the exact opposite happening”

What a great question!

**So many parents I meet are extremely frustrated these days, because youth sports has changed so much since their childhood. There are no longer seasons, just year-long commitments for kids. The costs and travel distances have gone through the roof. And the pressure on parents to keep up with the Jones’s has become astronomical.**

Many parents are simply trying to sort out the myths and facts of athlete development. They are told what to do by other parents and coaches if they want their children to have success in sports. Yet the path that so many children are following, and in many cases are forced to follow, is not the best path to develop as an athlete, nor as a human being.

In fact, their chosen path does just the opposite.

[It leads to high rates of injuries and burnout \(70% of kids quit youth sports by the age of 13\).](#)

It leads to a variety of psychological issues by attaching ones identity to sport success.

It robs children of their childhood.

It turns youth sports into big business that ties advancement to

financial means (the haves vs. the have not's) instead of ability (the can do's vs. the can't do's).

It [professionalizes and adultifies](#) youth sports by taking the emphasis off of enjoyment, development and play.

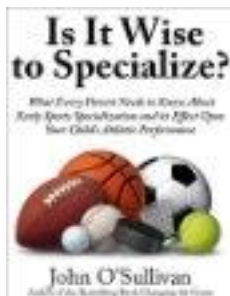
Sadly, there is a lot of misinformation out there. There is a lot of ignorance of the facts. In my opinion, this is driven by three pervasive youth sports myths.

**“The great enemy of the truth is very often not the lie, deliberate, contrived and dishonest, but the myth, persistent, persuasive and unrealistic,”** said John F. Kennedy. These three myths are incredibly persistent, very persuasive, and most troubling, they are damaging the very people they are intended to develop, our young athletes.

**Myth #1, “The Tiger Woods/10,000 Hour Myth:” Your child must specialize as early as possible if he or she wants to play college or pro sports**

We have all heard [misinformation from a coach or parent telling your child he/she needs 10,000 hours of deliberate practice as soon as possible](#). I have written about [specialization many times](#) on this blog, and [in this book](#), and yet every time I present these statistics people are skeptical, because this myth is so pervasive and convincing.

**The problem with this myth is that it ignores many components of athletic development beyond practice that determine athletic performance, namely genetics, coaching, enjoyment, and intrinsic motivation.**



Outside of female gymnastics, figure skating, and diving, there are no definitive studies that directly tie early specialization to greater chance of long-term, high-level success. [The number of pro athletes, Olympians and top coaches that tie high-level success to an early, multi-sport background, however, is very high](#). This does not mean top players did not play a lot of hockey, or soccer, or basketball, just that they did other things as well, and started putting

in their dedicated training hours in their middle teenage years. There are a lot of studies tying early specialization to higher injury rates ([see this article](#) and [Dr. James Andrews book Any Given Monday](#)), higher burnout and drop out rates, as well as psychological and identity issues. High-level sport performance experts such as [Tony Strudwick from Manchester United FC](#), football coaches such as Urban Meyer, and others stress the importance of multi-sport backgrounds to develop overall athleticism, decrease injury rates, and increase internal motivation.

Talent development programs in professional and college sports are no longer looking at simply what level an athlete plays at, but what got him or her there. They don't want a finished product, and oftentimes early specialists are at their peak of development, while multi-sport athletes have a bigger upside. Given the choice, they want upside over current performance.

In other words, instead of Tiger Woods, [raise a Steve Nash or a Jordan Spieth](#).

***Myth #2 “The 9 Year Old National Champion Myth:” We need to win as soon as possible, as often as possible, travel as far as we need to get games, and only pick and play the kids who help us do that.***

**Winning is not bad; it's not some evil thing to be avoided at all costs.** Quite the contrary. Kids like winning. They understand they need to try and score, and prevent the other team from scoring. They understand they need to try their best.

**What they do not understand is how winning could be more important than simply being out there playing. What they don't understand how winning could be more important than following the rules.**

**And what they will never understand, especially prior to high school age, is that the result of this game is more important than getting the opportunity to play.**

In my travels, every time I bring this up the naysayers jump on me and say, “he is the non-competition guy.” Wrong! I love competitive sports, and I hate participation trophies. I have coached competitive athletes my whole life, many of whom went on to become college and pro players. This myth does not produce better, more competitive athletes. It turns youth sports to an outcome focused enterprise, and puts way too much pressure to not make mistakes and try new things on young athletes trying to learn a sport. It produces bitter athletes

who quit, and excludes far too many potentially top performers because of birth month and developmental age.

The downward creep of select teams is pervasive, and again, quite convincing at first glance. It's not hard to find communities that make cuts, pick A and B teams, and start travelling long distances to find "competition" at ages as young as 6 and 7 years old. If I get the best players, exclude others, coach them and only play them in outcome focused events against other top players they will develop faster, right? How could this be bad?

Its wrong because if you are all about winning and cuts prior to puberty, you are selecting the kids who are very likely born within 3-4 months of your calendar cutoff for your age group, and are physically advanced compared to their peers. You are potentially cutting the top player at age 18 because he is young, and has not yet physically matured. **You are selecting early maturing kids, not identifying talent.** You are focusing on outcomes, not the process of getting better.

The things that often allow kids to win at young ages (height, speed, strength) won't serve them in later years unless they also develop technique, tactics, and the ability to think for themselves, three things that often go out the window in win at all costs youth sports.

Prior to age 12 is a time for kid to sample many sports, not be forced into choosing one. It is a time to develop as many players as possible, not a select few. It's a time to make mistakes in a learning environment, **not only focus on winning in an outcome environment.**

Kids must learn to love with the game, play for fun, own the experience, and develop the intrinsic motivation to improve. That is the path to long term success.

When winning is the priority prior to high school, then you are choosing short term success over long term development. This is not to say that you cannot properly develop players and win at the same time, but if given the choice, if you are truly concerned about your athlete's long term sporting future, then choose development.

***Myth #3, "Youth Sports is an Investment in a Scholarship:" If my kid specializes, gets on the winning team as early as possible, and I invest in long distance travel, private lessons, and the best gear, I will recoup this investment when college rolls around.***

Youth sports is an investment in many things, such as character development, athletic improvement, and becoming a healthy, well rounded human being. It is not, however, an investment in a future

scholarship.

This myth has been perpetuated by sporting goods companies, beverage makers, and some professional coaches looking to make a few extra bucks. A look at the numbers demonstrates that scholarships and pro contracts are reserved for an elite few athletes whose time, effort, and dedication, combined with their talent and a good dose of luck, led them to the higher ground. **Less than 3% of all high school athletes play their sport in college. Only 1 in 10,000 high school athletes gets a partial athletic scholarship. The average award is \$11,000 per year. Yet a huge number of parents THINK their kid is going to get a sports scholarship.**

For the majority of athletes, there is not a scholarship to be had, at least on the playing field. **Academic scholarship dollars far outweigh sports aid.** Sports is not a financial investment. **I am not saying that your child should not aspire to get one, or to play at the next level, but having a goal of excellence in sport is far better than having a goal of “get a scholarship.” And finally, if your child is only playing for a scholarship, and not love of the sport, it will be very hard for them to make it through the grind of college athletics!**

These three myths are very convincing at first glance, very persuasive to many parents who want only the best for their kids, and very unrealistic. Sadly, in far too many communities they have become the status quo. It is very difficult to convince people that this path is less likely to help your child become a better athlete, and far less likely to help him or her develop as a human being. These three myths are killing youth sports, damaging our kids, and making athletics a toxic environment for far too many children.

The best way to help your child succeed is not only to recognize the common mythology surrounding youth sports, but to overcome it by sharing this message with others who think like you do. This article is filled with links to other articles and research pieces, so even the skeptics can go straight to the source.

Find the parents who love their kids and want to help them get ahead, and share this article via email, Facebook, Twitter, you name it. Find other parents struggling to fight through these myths, those who are made to think “Am I a good enough parent if I don’t have my kid specialize, or hire a private coach, or pay for travel sports when my kid is in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade?” Share this with them!

Let’s overcome these myths!

Let's put the play back in playing youth sports.  
Let's change the game, and make it a far better one. That is within  
our reach. You can do your part simply by sharing this right now!