

Does Youth Sports Get the Math All Wrong?

Posted In [Problems in Youth Sports](#), [Specialization](#), [Talent Development](#)

“I did not know there would be math on this test,” is something I say (jokingly) when I get a difficult question at my speaking engagements. Recently, I received an email from a frantic mom, and it got me thinking about math. Yes, math. When it comes to our current sporting environment, I think we often get the math all wrong. Here is the relevant passage from the email:

“I am so perplexed by the college soccer recruiting process. We have been told that my daughter will not be able to play college soccer if she does not commit by the end of her Jr. year. She is going to all these showcases and has the pressure of playing in front of a lot of college coaches and has no clue as to where she wants to go. The pressure is intense and so unfair to all these girls. In addition, I can't tell you how many teams I would walk by who were passing around Aleve or Advil like it was candy, including my daughters team. They are playing injured and in pain for fear of missing an opportunity. How does the NCAA let this happen? I don't agree with it but my daughter wants to play college soccer and has the ability to do it but only if we buy in to this insanity. What should we do?”

Sadly this story is a common one, and in fact only a microcosm of how often we get the math wrong when it comes to the sports our kids play. When I say math, I mean the costs, the commitments, and the timing of so many scenarios in the games our kids play, as I will explain below.

This situation is increasingly frustrating for parents, many of whom don't want to mortgage the house to keep their kids in sports. These same parents want sports to be a part of a well-rounded childhood, not an arms race toward the elusive athletic scholarship.

It is frustrating for coaches, too, [especially those who value trying to develop players for long-term success, instead of trading tomorrow's development for today's win.](#)

It is frustrating for referees as well as they officiate youth and high school sporting events, while often being lambasted by adults who act as if the result of the match is equivalent in importance to the World Cup Finals.

And most importantly, our kids are frustrated as they are [increasingly beat up, beat down, and burned out by an athletic environment no longer serving their needs, no longer prioritizing their development, and no longer bringing enjoyment or sustaining their intrinsic motivation to compete.](#)

When I write things like this, I hear from a few parents telling others to “suck it up” or “go play rec” if you don't like it. I hear from some who think that this environment “hardens” kids and makes them competitive. They may be right for an incredibly small number of kids, perhaps those named Woods or Williams or Trout. But can your second grader do calculus? Some kids can, but that does not mean yours should have to, does it?

Instead of trying to pick a fight with all these “yeah but” people, [I will simply lay out five ways youth sports gets the math all wrong, based upon actual research](#), and lets open up a discussion. If you disagree with any of these, I am happy to read actual research and evidence to the contrary. Instead of a debate, where neither side actually listens to the other, lets have a discussion. That is what this page is for. Here we go:

5 Ways Youth Sports gets the Math All Wrong

1. Youth Sports Costs Way Too Much, Way Too Soon: We are creating barriers to entry to sports that should have very few. Soccer, for example, needs a round object and some space to play. Instead, we have tryouts, “elite” clubs and travel teams for 6-7 year olds. [Author Mark Hyman phrases it perfectly in the title of his great book about the cost of youth sports, The Most Expensive Game in Town](#). It costs thousands of dollars plus travel for some kids to play a sport that could almost be free. I am not saying that tryouts, travel, and high-level, long distance competition do not have a place in the game, but not before age 12 at the earliest. Local play and town leagues are disappearing. And worst, we have ramped up the pressure on parents to pay, coaches to produce, and kids to perform. As [former NFL punter turned college professor Travis Dorsch has found in his research, our kids are acutely aware of the money we spend on sports, and it adds pressure, and takes away enjoyment for them](#).

2. Youth Sports Makes Poor Use of Our Kids’ Time (and Ours): Let’s compare the average day of pickup games/free play to today’s hyper-organized sporting scene. In other words, lets look at the return on investment in time. In a pickup/free play environment, a child might walk 10 minutes on a Saturday to the park or pond to meet with friends. They organize teams and play, taking breaks every once in a while to change teams, gets a drink, eats, etc. Six hours later, the child goes home. His 6.5-hour investment yields about 5.5 hours of child directed sport.

Now take our highly organized environment. A child gets in the car at 9am, and drives ninety minutes to his travel game. He arrives a minimum of one hour prior to kickoff, and a warm up commences 30 minutes prior to game time. He plays a 60-minute game, and for arguments sake he plays 40 minutes (a hockey team with 3 lines might yield 20 minutes of play or less with a coach who does not think every kid needs to play.) The coach/team spends 30 minutes changing and debriefing after the game, the player grabs a bite to eat, and he arrives home two hours later. A 5.5-hour investment of time, for one hour of play.

In a nutshell, instead of spending the vast majority of his day at play, making rules, calling fouls, playing fearlessly, and involved in self-directed learning, our kids spend most of it in a car (and so do we). We pay a lot more for a lot less time on task.

3. Ratio of Games vs. Training: Games and competitive matches certainly have their place, but our overemphasis on competition, especially at the youngest ages, is detrimental on two fronts.

First, our current environment [yields a ratio of one game for one practice in many sports, which is not ideal](#). A well run hour of baseball practice might get every player a few dozen swings, and dozens of attempts at throwing, catching and fielding. A one-hour game might see him get 8-10 swings, and depending upon

position, 3-10 additional touches of the ball. I cannot think of a sport where an athlete does not get more reps in training. Yet, **at the critical ages of development, where kids need as many touches and attempts as possible, we are choosing to play competitive games that give them very few, instead of practice that will help develop technical mastery.** Why do we play so many games? [According to former NBA player turned youth sports advocate Bob Bigelow](#), “Adults want to win; kids want to play. That’s the difference. The more adult needs you add to these sports, the more adult vision, the more adult needs have to be met.”

Second, and I think this is critical; our massive emphasis on tournament play is developing slow players. [Three-time World Cup soccer coach Raymond Verheijan](#), one of the world’s experts on periodization, training and injury prevention, first stated this idea to me. “Think about it,” he said. “In your first tournament game, everyone plays full speed, 100%. But your second game of the day, you are at 90% because of fatigue. Your third and fourth game of the weekend, you are at 80% speed. If you make the final, everyone is tired, sore, carrying injuries, and playing 70-80% of full speed. Not only are your players increasingly susceptible to injury, but in four out of your five games, they have played at a slower speed due to fatigue. Your players are rarely playing at maximum pace or making maximum decisions per minute. In a mental game like soccer, they are learning over and over to play slowly.”

4. The Age of Specialization is Way Too Young: I [have written articles on this subject](#), and the book [“Is it Wise to Specialize”](#) so if you want more on



this topic click the links. Until there is compelling science, and not simply outlier, one-in-a million examples like “look at Tiger” to show that early specialization is a better path for player development, I believe the science shows that the multi-sport pathway prior to age 12 gives your child the best chance of long term success. Outside of female figure skating and gymnastics, playing a single sport prior to the age of 12, especially when it is the decision of the parent or coach, and not the athlete, only serves to decrease ownership, enjoyment and intrinsic motivation, while increasing the risk of burnout and injury. **Let your kids play multiple sports, and help them find their passion instead of trying to determine it for them.**

5. Talk About College Sports Starts Too Young: As evident by the letter I received from the mom quoted above, too many coaches and parents are talking about scholarships at an age they should be talking about love of the game and developing excellence. As the mom noted, her daughter had no idea what she wanted to study, where she wanted to go to school, and likely had been to very few college campuses, yet she was being told “commit soon or else.” I have yet

to meet a college coach, especially on the women's side where the problem seems exacerbated, that likes this current system of evaluating and recruiting middle schoolers, and committing scholarships to kids 3-5 years before they will ever step on campus. Yet they also feel powerless to stop. As a result, [we have a generation of college athletes heading to schools that are not the best fit, majoring in subjects they have little interest in, and transferring at a very high rate.](#)

It's time to get the math right in youth sports. don't you think? Here are a few steps to do so that will make it better for our kids, and better for the adults as well:

- 1 Do not force, or be forced, into having your child specialize too early.** The evidence supports a multi-sport pathway.
- 2 Have your child play one sport per season, and play it with full effort and commitment.**
- 3 Do not be in a hurry to get on the team that travels the farthest, or collects all the best players as soon as possible.** Save your money and time until your child's ability and desire demands it, and your family and finances can support it. Performance prior to puberty is not a great indicator of performance after it.
- 4 Find local free play opportunities, take your child and friends to the park, and let them play.** Have your kids play futsal, or 3v3, do tumbling and martial arts, and build those hours on task through more efficiently through child-centered fun.
- 5 Look for quality of competition, not just quantity.** Don't be mesmerized by the coach that tells you about all the games they play, and all the tournaments they go to. **Find a coach and club that talks about how much they practice, and how much every player gets to play and how they develop on their own time frame.**
- 6 Stop talking about college sports too soon.** Worry about your child becoming a good player, and developing a burning desire to play. College sports are hard, and demand a ton of time; if sport is a job and not a passion, they won't make it. Yes, some schools and sports want early commitments, but they also want great players. If your child is good, and patient, chances are she will find a school that is a much better fit than one she was in a hurry to commit to 3-4 years prior.

Let's hit the reset button, and get the math right. Let's start investing our precious time wisely, and our precious dollars in the right things, and at the right time. We can make the math work.

Our kids need us to.

So what do you think? How can we start getting the math right, and giving sports back to our kids? Let the discussion begin below.