



Influence from parents and club coaches are forcing more young athletes to choose one sport instead of participating with multiple teams.

Confronting specialization

Why more athletes are choosing one sport, and what you can do to stop it

By Kevin Bryant, CMAA, Thrive Athletic Consulting, LLC, Portland, Oregon

We have lost the sandlot. It used to be that parents sent their youngsters out the door to play in the neighborhood with the stipulation to be back by dinner or when it gets dark. Kids happily left the home with enough gear to play several sports throughout the day.

Rules were made up by those participating rather than the adults, and disputes were all settled by the children involved. Kids had to make it up as they went along, negotiate and make things work. It was the "sandlot," a welcoming haven for kids all over the neighborhood — not a place for parents. The sandlot was some out-of-the-way haven where kids were free to

make things work for themselves. It was a place where kids learned to get along and used the sport opportunity as a way to grow up and build lasting rivalries and friendships.

The sandlot hardly exists anymore. An estimated 30 to 40 million American children ages 6 to 17 participate in some form of athletic activity on a regular basis. According to a 2014 survey by the Sports and Fitness Industry Association, 53 percent of kids aged 6 to 14 play in a team sport. A University of Michigan study found that from 1981-97, children doubled the time they spent playing or practicing an organized sport.

Free play has become a rarity as the big business of youth sports now runs the show.

"The current structure of youth sports in this country is designed to serve just the five to 10 percent of the population that might play varsity athletics," said Mark Hyman, a former sports writer who now teaches sport management at George Washington University.

"I think youth sports are an incredibly important part of the kids' experience growing up," he added. "There are so many valuable lessons to be learned there. I want to do everything I can to encourage kids to play sports, but what I am suggesting is that the system that is set up now is doing just the opposite.

"Seventy percent of kids drop out of youth sports by age 13. Of course you expect some attrition. Some kids are going to prefer to play violin or the piano, while others spend their time

at the mall. You wouldn't expect 100 percent retention, but 70 percent is astonishing and disturbing. Kids, in a sense, have voted and are voting every day when they decide to do something else than be a part of organized sports."

Many young athletes are burning out, pushed by parents who see the gold at the end of the rainbow in the form of an athletic scholarship. As unrealistic as this goal might be, we have lost the sandlot. The joy is leaving the game for many kids who enter high school with multiple sport experiences that are quickly truncated by a loss of interest due to stress, time management, loss of friends in a particular sport, burnout, injury and the growth of non-traditional or emerging sports.

The club effect

The past two years, elite high school soccer players in the Pacific Northwest are being asked to make a decision: play for your club team

or for your high school team. You cannot do both.

Several Portland area soccer players have chosen their high school team, but that's not an easy decision. While the club impact has not reached critical mass in football and basketball, it seems headed that way, especially in the summer months. Volleyball, soccer, swimming, water polo, tennis and golf have been impacted by the involvement of high school students in club sports. With the training and practice demands becoming so significant, many high school student-athletes are forced to make critical decisions on their athletic futures by their sophomore year of high school.

The impact on high school athletic programs is significant. National publications have decried that it's time to get rid of high school sports, claiming club sports (the European model) are the truest path to a college scholarship. I would agree with the path and disagree with reason to take

that path. High school sports are not for the elite athlete alone. The goal of high school sport is not college scholarships, it's teaching social and moral skills that will last a lifetime. It's learning that the team is more important than the individual, that you must deal with the ups and downs of life and that you must be willing to be coached by someone who is not always complimentary of your efforts or attitudes.

Former Division I basketball coach Len Stevens is one of those voices calling for an end to high school sports. There are several reasons why Stevens, now the executive director of the Reno-Sparks Chamber of Commerce, feels the way he does, and they all revolve around how our changing culture has led to changes in high school sports.

He argues that when high school sports were introduced, they were designed as an inclusive part of the educational experience, and for decades they remained that way. Now, that takes a back seat.



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Stevens points out:

- Coaches were supposed to be teachers. Now fewer than half of them are.
- Each passing year, fewer and fewer students attend their school's games. Stevens referenced a recent study showing fewer than 10 percent attend games.
- At almost every school, principals tell you their greatest headache is dealing with parents who have complaints about their child's experience in sports. Those often revolve around playing time, the coach's record or the coach's personality.

I understand what Stevens is saying, but I disagree with his position. Sports in our communities build pride and a needed sense of connection. Sports bring that community together and they often teach life lessons. High school sports demand academic accountability, self-sacrifice and challenge each participant to put others first. High school sports teach student-athletes how to become teammates, a skill useful in any career they might pursue. High school sports are fun for those that participate in whatever way they choose, whether it's being an athlete, band member, cheerleader, dance team member or fan. And it's not about the elite athlete driven by a college scholarship. It's about the other 98 percent who are taking part for all the right reasons.

According to the NCAA, about 2 percent of high school athletes are awarded athletic scholarships to compete in college. And for the 25th straight year, participation numbers are up nationwide, according to the National Federation of State High School Associations.

It's the pressure to earn athletic scholarships that is leading to athlete burnout, overuse injuries and specialization. When you play on a high school team where several potential scholarship winners come and go to meet their individual needs, teams become discouraged and disoriented. Kids signing up for high school sports want to do their best to succeed, and that's difficult to do when high-profile

The department attitude must be, "We are about what is best for the athlete and not the individual sport."

athletes are following their own plan versus that of the overall group.

Having an elite athlete on your team is exciting. College coaches send mail, call and all the other forms of communication allowed under NCAA rules. Teammates might even think this could result in exposure for themselves, potentially leading to their own scholarship.

Many colleges now discourage multi-sport participation. A football player who wants to join rugby, track or lacrosse is often discouraged from doing so by the recruiting coach due to potential injury.

Parents knowingly and unknowingly push their children toward specialization whether it's due to finances, time restraints or family issues. Costs are becoming more prohibitive in club and high school sports, so to combine the two can put families in a tough spot.

In Oregon, a club sport can cost anywhere from \$2,000 to \$7,000 annually depending on the sport and depth of commitment required. A majority of Oregon schools require some type of participation fee to take part in athletics. Some districts might offer the third sport free or some type of individual/family cap for those taking part. Fees in Oregon school districts range from \$100 to \$250 per person, per sport. When you add summer camp, team camp, special gear, team pictures and related outings, the numbers go way up.

Increased parent involvement in the youth and high school sports scene is forcing some kids to participate in new and emerging sports where parents have little experience and therefore cannot coach or interfere.

In the Northwest, lacrosse is growing by leaps and bounds from the youth levels on up, and other students are pursuing more "X-game" type sports like biking, skiing, snowboarding, kite surfing and surfing.

The American Medical Society for Sports Medicine defined burnout as the "result of chronic stress that causes a young athlete to cease participation in a previously enjoyable activity." The organization included these recommendations for decreasing burnout and the potential for injury:

- Limit weekly and yearly competition in a particular sport as well as sport-specific training.
- Emphasize skill development more than competition and winning.
- Monitor training workload during the adolescent growth spurt, when injury risk seems to be greater.
- Encourage sport diversification at young ages.

Encouraging participation

There are several things coaches and athletic administrators can do to encourage athletes to participate in multiple sports.

First, high school athletic departments must be on the same page. Multiple sport participation must become a department-wide value and not an individual sport value. If students are to be encouraged to participate in more than one sport, coaches must make it an achievable goal. The department attitude must be, "We are about what is best for the athlete and not the individual sport."

This is especially important in the offseason where sports often overlap. Athletic directors must be the leaders of this effort and constantly work to hire likeminded people for the department and create clear expectations for those within the program regarding multiple sport participation by student-athletes.

Schools should also make it affordable to play more than one high school sport. Take into consideration all the expenses that are involved and find a way to make it work. Team gear,

travel, summer tournaments, shoes and sweats are all reasons for families to opt out. Athletic directors must be sensitive to socioeconomic issues in families.

Athletic directors can impact the youth level feeder sports by leading the discussion regarding multi-sport participation by youth athletes. Taking a long-term view and what is best for individual and team sports youth athletes need to be encouraged and allowed to experience multiple sports growing up.

Talk with parents about the issue of specialization and what the realities are as they relate to college, health and athlete enjoyment. Make the parents part of the dialogue.

While serving as an interscholastic athletic administrator, I gave a presentation every year called "Your Athletic Future" that laid out the different ways kids might take part in college sports after high school. It was a great way of giving parents a wakeup call with general and


clear information about the various opportunities that exist for their athletes' futures.

It's also important to reward three-sport athletes. Give a special end-of-the-year award to those who have played three sports, especially if they have done this throughout all of high school. Have a special place for them to have their picture posted in your athletic recognition area. Have a recognizable name for this special place and make sure it's well known in the press and community.

Lastly, involve your team members in helping sell the concept to younger high school athletes. If you have a "Captains Club" or "Student Athlete Leadership Team," let them speak with other athletes in your program regarding the benefits of multiple sport participation.

Three-sport athletes used to be the norm around the country, but times have changed. If we want to encourage and make it possible for

our high school athletes to participate in multiple sports, we must get away from doing the same things day after day and expecting different results.

It's our job to make it possible financially, and we must be united within our schools to make sure that all of our coaches are together on multiple sport student-athlete participation. Talk is cheap, and it's our actions that show our true commitment. 

Kevin Bryant, CMAA, is the President and Founder of Thrive Athletic Consulting, LLC, a company focused on assisting, encouraging, and challenging high school athletic administrators to be the best they can be. He is the author of "The Athletic Director Survival Guide: a practical guide for interscholastic athletic administrators," and he is working on his Ph.D in sport pedagogy and character education at the University of Idaho. He can be reached at kevin.bryant024@outlook.com.

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