



Let Kids Play Multiple Sports

By Bill Gosse

Posted September 15, 2007 in the Green Bay Press-Gazette

There is a trend taking place in youth sports. Some kids are specializing and training year-round in one sport at an early age.

When I was younger, multi-sport athletes seemed to be the norm. I feel sorry for kids today who only play one sport, because I can't imagine my past without any of the four high school sports I played.

As a quarterback, I strategized with my teammates in the huddle about how we would attack the defense.

In basketball, I was able to lead the conference in scoring for one week.

Baseball gave me the great thrill of throwing a no-hitter, and the golf team furnished free golf.

What could be better than that?

Of course, there are legitimate reasons some kids play only one sport: lack of time, limited budgets, hectic schedules, etc. But there is one reason I can't accept as legitimate - coaches and/or obsessive parents who force kids to pick one sport.

True story: A brand-new varsity baseball coach from a local lakeshore high school was ecstatic that his preseason meeting yielded twenty-five sign-ups. In fact, he was so elated he told an opposing coach about his success. When their two teams met during the season, the opposing coach noticed the rookie coach only had 12 players available. Asked to explain his low turnout, the bewildered rookie coach indicated the school's basketball coach got a hold of his players and told them if they wanted to be part of the basketball program, they were going to have to work on basketball year-round. There went half of his baseball players.

Also true: A multi-sport athlete was a pro prospect as a baseball player. Instead of being supportive of the athlete, his football coach told him if he wanted to be on the football team the next year, he would have to forego legion baseball. To the player's credit, he decided to ignore his football coach's demands, and baseball ultimately became his profession.

Finally, unfortunately true: One obsessive father didn't make it into professional football himself. But he had a son, and by golly, he was bound and determined to get his boy into the NFL. At age 10, the poor kid was forced to specialize in football year round and had to train numerous hours every day. I'm sure the boy liked football, but that's a lot of hitting and pounding for a 10 year old body to take. I wonder if he enjoyed playing as much as his dad enjoyed watching him.

Why do coaches and certain parents do this? Is it pure selfishness? Is it because school administrators are pressuring coaches to win at all costs? Is it the elusive scholarship, or glamour and glory for parents?

Regardless of the real reason, this era of specialization comes with a price. With a high level of competition year round, not only are kids burning out mentally, they are burning out physically.

Dr. James Andrews, the nationally renowned orthopedic surgeon, says he is seeing four times more overuse injuries in youth sports than he saw just five years ago. He also says more kids are having surgery for chronic sports injuries.

Playing multiple sports gives our body the opportunity to use certain muscles while others are resting. By forcing kids to pick one sport, the same muscles are used over and over without recovery time.

Why can't one sport serve as a training program for another? Yes, professional athletes focus on one sport, but even they adjust their off-season training to allow for complete recovery.

Jackie Robinson was one of the greatest athletes of all time, yet many only know him as a baseball player. In college, Jackie starred in football, basketball, track and baseball.

I'm glad he wasn't forced to pick one sport at an early age. Reportedly, baseball was his least favorite sport.