

*Vealey webinar 8-11-16*

*Athlete Development through Multiple Sport Participation*

*Questions log*

Q: Small schools depend on multiple-sport athletes as the pool of athletes is small. A few coaches resist encouraging their athletes to continue to diversify. I find this problematic for those willing and able to have a fuller high school experience. Most are not going to play beyond recreationally. Why specialize ever?

I think your point about small high schools is excellent. I've had coaches and athletic directors say this to me as well. One thing we can do is to make it a point of pride in schools like these to encourage athletes, including the best athletes, to contribute to multiple programs and explain the benefits (I like your term "a fuller high school experience"). I envision coaches in these schools working together to schedule and be flexible to allow diverse participation.

And your argument about "why specialize ever" is a compelling one. It may be for a talented athlete who is really "in" to his or her signature sport to choose to focus on that going in to the junior or senior year of high school. This is usually discussed with coaches and parents and the athlete – to gain as much information and pros and cons to make an informed decision. But I've had college athletes on scholarship tell me that they did it (only played one sport their last two years, and then regretted it later).

Q: Where did the statistic citing 90% injured or burned out due to early specialization come from?

Secondary source online citing Dr. Neeru Jayanthi of Loyola University. Look for his article on Sports Health, 2013 May 5 (3), 251-257.

Q: How do you apply "success" in a certain activity and its effect on young athletes?

Not exactly sure of question, but I strongly believe (and research supports) that success is and should be defined subjectively. This works easily in swimming and track and field, where personal bests in times and lengths work great. In team sports, parents and coaches can find many markers of success. I believe youth sport coaches should define success based on whether every single athlete improved that season. There are so many markers of success in sport, if we identify, observe, and then celebrate those with the athletes. Winning is just one marker, and an uncontrollable one at that.

Q: As a parent, how do I hide my frustration that my high school freshman really loves playing basketball yet scouts are already talking to him for his baseball skills?

Yes, I understand. But in honesty, I would say that you're right – you need to hide it. I think that he (depending on age) could continue to play basketball for fun – right? And then when he is a junior or so in high school, see where he is, and sit down with him and coaches and discuss this with him. It ultimately has to be his choice. There are

several examples of kids who were great at a sport when very young, and then changed their minds later (after parents spent a lot of money and time in the one sport). It has to be his dream, although I would tell him that and also educate him about considering what he does best. Interestingly, I have college athletes tell me this occasionally. So it's not uncommon to play a sport, even when another sport is your first love.

Q: Can you speak to the prevalence of collegiate athletes who identify as dual sport participants and receive offers with agreement to allow participation in both sports only to be forced to choose one over the other once enrolled?

Yeah, this stinks for sure. I don't know about the prevalence of this, but it seems to me to be a "contractual" agreement between coaches and athletes. It seems important to me that someone else be involved – like the athletic director – who can verify the deal made and honor it. Unfortunately, coaches do have the power to go back on their word about this.

Q: I am a secondary school coach. Can non-athletic extracurricular activities (i.e. performing arts) provide a viable alternative to playing sports year round without diminishing the student-athletes' self-determinism and personal motivation?

Absolutely. In fact, unless I'm misunderstanding your question, I think such extracurricular activities would enhance their feelings of autonomy and personal motivation. My daughter does this with volleyball, steel drum band, and Academic Challenge team. She loves volleyball and plays fall school season and spring club season, but also is very academic and is not at all defined singularly as an athlete. I think this is really a good option for students.

Q: Comment: Coaches are not performance appraised nor rewarded for individual athlete potential fulfillment. Coaches are rewarded for team and program success only. Altruism only goes so far unfortunately in American education.

I understand your point having been a coach, and I empathize with you and the pressure from parents and communities. However (and I have had this discussion/argument) with high school coaches, interscholastic sports are designed as extracurricular activities no different than band, chorus, etc., and the purpose is for student-athlete development over winning championships. But we've lost that, and I completely understand how coaches are behind the eight-ball. But I disagree, and think we should constantly remind ourselves what our focus and objectives are in youth sports prior to college.

Q: How do you treat an athlete who is elite at one sport early but also plays other sports? Does it count as specialization if she practices her main sport year round? ie: she's 12 years old and has always been one if the best at basketball; shouldn't she continue to basketball train during other seasons too?

Sure, if she loves it and wants to. If she wants to play summer ball (AAU), that's a

typical outlet for developing basketball skills. In our definition, we would call this specialization because she's focusing on that perhaps as her signature sport. But she is still playing other sports, hopefully because she enjoys them and they give her that psychological recharge and cross-training advantage. That is the path I would have followed had I been born later. Loved basketball – couldn't get enough of it – so I would have played club/AAU but also played volleyball and ran track because I enjoyed those as well. Just keep checking with her – how is it going? Is it too much? Does she want to play? Does she enjoy it? It's fine to do it year-round with some time off for other sports, if she's interested in continuing with those.

Q: Do you think club sports force parents to put their child in one sport due to the promise "If she plays club, the better chance Susie will get a scholarship"?

Yes. I polled several of my college coaching friends (softball, basketball, volleyball) and they said that it would be hard to make their programs without playing club – and a pretty high level club. What I don't think should happen is that they quit everything else. This is where I think coaches should work together and allow some concessions for those playing multiple sports.

But be careful. Coaches may say this just to entice parents and kids. It depends on how old the athlete is, and how extensive the club travel and schedule is. It's certainly partially true, based on what my college coaching friends say, that club participation is warranted IF the athlete has the potential to play in college. But to be forced to play year round with this possible change – or maybe no chance based on talent – I think is wrong.

Q: Can Dr. Vealey cite the leading reason talented, fully capable athletes quit a sport (parent, coach, girl/boyfriend, etc)? How much does growing up through the dating years derail an athlete?

There are probably multiple reasons why athletes quit, which you've noted. Our research shows that the number one reason why kids quit is that it's not any fun. Now that is a bit more comprehensive, because it may be that they're not getting to play or their friends aren't on the team, etc. But to me that comes back to the importance of passion. If they don't like/love it and don't want to play, they won't. It was hard for me to understand and accept why my daughter did not at all like basketball (killed me – really!), when both my spouse and I played college basketball. But she didn't like the contact or the game. So I finally understood and accepted it – and her for who she is, and actually a good lesson for me.

Another way to think about this is that kids (like all of us) are motivated to fulfill their needs. The big three psychological needs are competence, autonomy, and relatedness – as central to our motivation. So for whatever reason, certain sports don't meet these needs – and they seek relatedness or competence in other ways (e.g., dating).