In this issue, IYCA Director of Education & Research shares his insight on sport specialization. This 2 part contribution is a must read for all IYCA Members. - Pat Rigsby CEO, IYCA

Sport Specialization for Young Athletes

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In the United States, the model of Sport Specialization for Young Athletes has grown from an obscure practice employed by relatively few parents and coaches seeking to give their children and/or athletes every possible advantage over the competition to a now widely accepted and seemingly necessary step toward a promising amateur and potentially professional career in competitive sport.

While there is no doubt that early and frequent exposures to physical activity during the formative years is associated with a number of positive health benefits, the real question is whether or not the practice of early sport specialization can lead to athletic success, and secondarily injury resistance, later in life. Unfortunately for most overzealous coaches and parents, current research would seem to indicate that the answer is a convincing "no" on both counts.

Unfortunately, such information flies in the face of current sports participation trends in most communities. "Elite" teams and "travel squads" have been developed for athletes across many sports, some even forming for athletes at the age of five or six years old.

Despite the research on Sport Specialization for Young Athletes, many would argue that their young child has noted dramatic improvements as a result of these earlier sport exposures.

So who's right?

The International Youth Conditioning Association (IYCA), established in 2003 to provide much needed reform to the growing subspecialty of youth fitness and athletic development training, consistently points to one factor exclusive to the youth market. Unlike their adult counterparts, children are growing and their development is always in some state of flux. Simply put, nearly all training stimuli can be effective. The real question is which approach is optimal.

Recent findings provide ample evidence to the fact that early specialization can be linked to chronic injury, burnout, and early withdrawal from sport participation. Chronic overuse injuries account for approximately 50% of new injuries in pediatric sports medicine practices.

In particular, the developing skeletal system is especially at risk, with bone and growth plate injuries previously not observed in young athletes being seen with alarming and increasing frequency. These findings and other similar studies have led the American Academy of Pediatrics to suggest that athletes under the age of 12-13 avoid specialization altogether, opting instead for a broader based and sometimes less intense plan for physical activity.
With dwindling opportunities for physical education in cash-strapped school districts and increasing competition within both school-based and private or public sports leagues, parents hungry for assistance have generated a demand for private training services catered especially to young athletes.

One such business, Athletic Revolution International, is a growing franchise based model with over 60 locations in the US and Internationally. Unlike many other similarly targeted training businesses, the Athletic Revolution training system has been designed around the unique physical and psychological needs of developing athletes as they progress through a well defined developmental system as well as specializing in Sport Specialization for Young Athletes.

Instead of focusing on short term gains at the expense of long term sport enjoyment and performance benefits, Long Term Athletic Development (LTAD) programming like that used at Athletic Revolution is designed to slowly and steadily develop motor skills and abilities over time, enhancing athlete enjoyment, ensuring healthy musculoskeletal balance and development, and gradually moving toward sport specialization only after an adequate athletic "base" has been established.

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The end result is an athlete who is happier, healthier, and ultimately more effective when the significance of sport participation begins to increase during the teen years.

The IYCA summarizes the philosophy of LTAD quite succinctly. "What a growing and maturing body needs in order to remain injury free and develop optimal athletic skill is variety. With respect to training, this amounts to NOT having a hyper-focus on making a young athlete a better football player by only doing exercises in the gym that the NFL players would do. The strongest and fastest athletes in any sport are the ones who had the greatest diversity of training while they were young."

That said, parents and coaches are encouraged to analyze the sport exposures of the children under their care with a critical eye. While attempting to win the little league championship may seem like a wonderful goal, it should never come at the cost of what is best for the athlete's long term development.

For more great youth fitness and sports performance information and resources go to www.IYCA.org.