

## The Downfalls of Early Sport Specialization



It is becoming an all too common trend in youth sports for athletes to begin completely focusing on one sport at a very early age. While many feel that this singular focus is necessary for the athlete to advance and progress in their desired sport, many downsides have been discovered when one sport is focused on too early in the development of an athlete. It has been found that early sport specialization can lead to increased injury risk, burnout, and quitting the sport altogether. Studies have looked at the effects of early sport specialization in the youth athlete and have found different negative outcomes resulting from such specialization. One particular review, Jayanthi et al. (2012), defined sports specialization as “intense, year-round training in a single sport with the exclusion of other sports”. This study found that an analysis of 481 baseball pitchers 9-14 years old showed “that those who pitched more than 100 innings per year were 3.5 times more likely to be injured”. While they also found “a significantly increased risk for shoulder or elbow surgery if pitching more than 8 months per year”. While these results looked at baseball, similar results have been seen across multiple sports.

Focusing solely on one sport at such an early age can lead to burnout and quitting as well. When too much time is spent working on one sport at such a young age, it is much easier for the athlete to get tired of that sport and lose their desire to continue playing the sport. At such a young age playing sports should be more about the child enjoying themselves and less about looking to a possible future in that sport. The reality is that few athletes achieve the elite or professional level. Less than 1% of young athletes 6-17 years of age achieve elite status in basketball, soccer, baseball, softball, or football. Keeping a sport fun for the young athlete is much more important for their longevity in that sport. This viewpoint can also be seen from very successful professional athletes. John Smoltz, Hall of Fame pitcher, was quoted as saying, “I want to encourage the families and parents that are out there to understand that this is not normal to have a surgery at 14 and 15 years old. That you have time, that baseball is not

a year-round sport. That you have an opportunity to be athletic and play other sports. Don't let the institutions that are out there running before you guaranteeing scholarship dollars and signing bonuses that this is the way. We have such great, dynamic arms in our game that it's a shame we're having one and two and three Tommy John recipients.”

Finally, Janaynithi et al. (2012) found that “the greater the number of activities that the athletes experienced and practiced in their developing years, the less sports-specific practice was necessary to acquire expertise in their sport”. Allowing and encouraging young athletes to participate across multiple sports will likely lead to more enjoyment, longer participation, and fewer injuries, which can all lead to greater chances of success.

Brian Pettis, MS, ATC, CSCS

Jayanthi, N., Pinkham, C., Dugas, L., Patrick, B., & Labella, C. (2012). Sports Specialization in Young Athletes: Evidence-Based Recommendations. *Sports Health: A Multidisciplinary Approach*, 251-257.

---

McLeod Sports Medicine  
2439 Willwood Dr.  
Florence SC, 29501  
(843) 777-5139

Visit us at  
[www.McLeodSportsMedicine.org](http://www.McLeodSportsMedicine.org) and  
Follow us on Facebook



---

*The information presented is offered only as something to consider in your quest for health and well-being. Always consult your healthcare provider before making any lifestyle changes.*