The Problem with Youth Sports Today

Mike Caton

It would appear that everything is going well for youth sports in the US. According to a recent study, participation on youth sports has jumped from 54% in 2000 to 59% in 2005*. Organized youth sports have never been more popular. Children at increasingly younger ages are joining sports teams and clubs. What’s more, younger children are starting to specialize in one sport in order to get a leg up on the competition with the hopes of earning college scholarships.

This all sounds great, right? Not exactly. The statistic we’re not hearing is that 70% of these athletes drop out by the time they reach high school. Even more drop out during their high school years. Sports psychologists have done extensive research to determine the root cause of these dropout rates, and have found that athletes quit sports because there is too much emphasis on organization and competition, increased pressure to perform well and an increasingly high time demand for participation.

A look at the research on psychological and social development of young athletes reveals a consistent theme: Participating regularly in a variety of physical activities will give you an abundance of psychological, physical and social benefits that lead to long-term development and participation in sports. On the other hand, involvement in a single sport year-round prior to age 15 leads to a variety of social and physiological risks. Here are some summaries of findings by sports psychologists:

- Participation in a variety of physical activities gives youngsters greater self-esteem and confidence in sports.
- Young athletes under 15 are most likely to develop inner motivation that leads to success in sports and other areas of life.
- Athletes that participate in a variety of sports are less likely to drop out of sports than their counterparts that focus on only one.
- Athletes that focus on a single sport until age 15 acquire less experience to help them make decisions about future sports participation.
- When young people participate in more sports, they increase their exposure to fellow athletes and coaches in a greater variety of environments which prepares them for lifelong enjoyment in sports and engaged citizenship.
- Athletes burn out and withdraw from a sport that they once loved because they believe that they cannot keep up with the increasingly demanding expectations.
- Researchers believe that if children are exposed to competition and advanced skill work too soon, they will experience decreased levels of self-esteem which will lead to anxiety towards sports and competition.

Suggestions

In an effort to slow these high drop-out rates in sports and physical activity, the National Association of Sport and Physical Education proposes these guidelines for parents and athletes:

- Encourage young people to try a variety of sports and activities
• Evaluate youth sports programs in terms of their effectiveness in promoting self-esteem and perceptions of competence of young people.
• Reduce burnout, boredom and drop out by discouraging specialization in one sport until a young person can make an informed decision, usually at about age 15+.

Another group of sports psychologists have used the research to create recommendations for youth sports participation that are designed to extend the life of an individual’s participation and increase their enjoyment**. These guidelines are:

**Ages 6-12 – Sampling Phase**
• Sample a wide range of activities
• Emphasize fun and excitement
• Dominated by “deliberate play” (see table below)

**Ages 13-15 – Specializing Phase**
• Narrow to 1-2 sports
• Increase sports-specific skill development

**Ages 16+ - Investment Phase**
• Committed to excellence in a chosen sport
• Lots of “deliberate practice” (see table below)
• Family’s activities focused around child’s sports timetable

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Deliberate Play</th>
<th>Deliberate Practice</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Played for the sake of playing</td>
<td>Participate for the sake of achieving a goal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjoyable</td>
<td>Not always enjoyable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexible/adapted rules</td>
<td>Explicit rules</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult involvement not required</td>
<td>Adult involvement often required</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This model allows the young athlete to feel good about sports and thereby desire to continue for internal reasons. It also factors in the athletes cognitive development; at younger ages (8-12) athletes can only judge competence based on comparison to their peers. It isn’t until they are older (12-14) that they can cognitively piece together the relationship between practice, effort and performance. This approach leads to confidence which in turn leads to motivation for continued participation. It also allows them to find the sports to which they are best suited.

*National Survey of Children’s Health 2005
**Developmental Model of Sports Participation