



Playing Multiple Sports Offers Many Benefits

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The values of participating in high school activity programs are well-documented. Generally speaking, these students have higher grades and better attendance, are more disciplined and self-confident and have better chances for a successful career than those students who do not participate in sports or performing arts.

So, if participation in one sport or activity during the school year is a positive step, what about involvement in multiple sports or activities? For instance, does the student who participates in football in the fall, basketball in the winter and baseball in the spring accrue more benefits than a single-sport participant?

We would answer most assuredly "yes." Somewhere along the line, however, specialization in a single sport began to creep into high school sports, and the movement in that direction continues today – not only for athletes but coaches as well. The proliferation of non-school coaches certainly has played a large role in the reduction of multiple-sport coaches.

At a recent meeting of state associations in Sections 7 and 8 (Western part of the United States), staff members from the Montana High School Association noted that schools in the Big Sky Country are struggling to field teams and fill coaching positions because more athletes – and coaches – are specializing in one sport. Many schools in the less-populous Western states rely on multiple-sport participants to fill teams.

While it might be a slippery slope to say that something was better in the past, in the case of athletes who had the opportunity to play multiple sports in high school, we believe that to be true. Case in point was this year's National High School Hall of Fame Induction Ceremony and the four athletes who were inducted. All four eventually selected one sport in which to specialize, but in high school they all were multiple-sport participants.

Fred Hoiberg played four sports at Ames (Iowa) High School – and excelled in all of them – before eventually playing basketball professionally. Kevin Johnson, one of the best players in NBA history, didn't play the sport year-round in high school. He was a tremendous baseball player as well. Pat Sullivan was one of the most highly sought football players in Alabama high school history, but he also was a two-time all-state selection in basketball. Tracy

Hill was the most prolific scorer in Colorado girls basketball history, but she also played volleyball and ran track.

In a feature in last month's *High School Today*, Hoiberg said, "Playing several different sports was valuable to me. Running track kept me in shape and helped with my overall athleticism. Playing quarterback really helped develop my leadership skills. Baseball and basketball were my two loves, though, but the whole situation was valuable."

Having noted the benefits of multiple-sport participation personally, however, Hoiberg also noted that "These days you almost have to choose a sport in which to specialize."

Undoubtedly, the growth of non-school sports teams has played a significant role in the reduction of multiple-sport participants as parents and coaches have encouraged specialization because they believe it is an investment in a future scholarship in college and – in some cases – a future professional career.

While there may be a small number of high school athletes who could benefit from a year-round focus on one sport, the overwhelming majority of the almost 7.7 million participants in high school sports will gain far more benefits by being involved in multiple sports.

The benefits of multiple-sport participation include better leadership and teamwork skills from cross-training, reduced risk of burnout in one sport, a variety of experiences from involvement with different sports and teams, reduced risk of overuse injuries in one sport and exposure to a variety of coaching styles.

Perhaps the argument for multiple-sport participation is best stated by what the student loses by specializing in one sport.

Matthew Shomper, athletic director at Tippecanoe High School in Tipp City, Ohio, in the May 2011 *High School Today*, noted that when a student-athlete specializes in one sport, he or she loses "the socialization with a slightly different peer group; a different coaching model and seeing things in a different context than if the individual played a variety of sports each year."

We would encourage school leaders to educate parents and students about the benefits of multiple-sport participation. As the old saying goes, "variety is the spice of life." ◉