

ACTIVATING AURORA: The Dangers of Sport Specialization

By Ron Weese

A colleague recently tweeted out that that early specialization has been proven to result in poorer performance in sport at the elite level.

I wrote in response that, "Early sport specialization has no place in the Canadian sport system, but parents crave it. Local sport organizations need leadership and courage."

The response to the tweet was immediate. I have never seen as many re-tweets and likes on anything I had ever written. Such was the overwhelming support from researchers, high-performance coaches, sport leaders and yes, even parents.

I watched Jordan Spieth last weekend win his second Professional Golf Association (PGA) tournament of the year and his tenth in his four short years on the PGA Tour. The story has it that Spieth actually asked his parents if he could quit other sports at the age of 12 to concentrate on golf and they discouraged this; wanting Jordan to play team sports and develop other skills, some of them personal. He became a standout pitcher in baseball, point guard in basketball, and quarterback in football, yet still became an outstanding professional golfer. Our own Wayne Gretzky also was a multi-sport athlete; playing baseball and lacrosse in his youth. The U.S. Olympic Committee Report on the Formula for Developing Elite Athletes showed that in the 2000 Olympic Athletes in that study, most Olympians did not specialize in their sport until very late in their development. Even then, some continued to participate in other sports. A similar study from Germany also showed that virtually NO Olympians achieved their athleticism and success if they specialized too early in sport.

Note here the average number of sports played by the US Olympic Teams surveyed. Age 10 and under- 3.11 sports; Ages 10-14 ? 2.99 sports; Age 15-18 ? 2.2 sports; Ages 19-22 ? 1.27 sports and Ages 22-older ? 1.31 sports. It is clear then. To have a better chance at becoming truly excellent at any single sport, athletes must participate in many sports.

But wait a minute! Every coach has heard about the 10,000 hour rule haven't they? The rule states that athletes have to practice at least 10,000 hours to become excellent at their sport. The logic is compelling that the more you practice, the better you get and the higher you achieve, right?

Not so fast, say the high-performance coaches.

What they now say is that athletes have to have 10,000 hours of deliberate, high-quality practice in many athletic activities to become athletes. That can and should start, particularly in the early years, in many sports. Athletes need to be able to learn how to run for any ground-based sport but learning to swim and skate exposes them to other locomotion skills for the future.

They need to be able to have balance and be stable in movement. They need to be able to manipulate objects like balls of all kinds with both hands and feet and be able to strike and throw and catch them with various implements. Then they need to be able to use those skills in many environments and be motivated to do so. By the way, that is called physical literacy and it doesn't often occur playing a single sport.

The real issue is that, across all North America, we have a serious drop-out problem with youth sport. Statistics show that by the age of 14, 70% of youth quit.

Why is this happening? It isn't fun anymore. Too many games, too much pressure to perform, too many over-use injuries. Kids get bored when they don't have a chance to switch gears with a new season and a new sport, meet new friends and learn new skills.

Physiotherapists are seeing more kids at younger ages with painful and sometimes debilitating over-use syndromes.

So what does this mean to parents and the kids who want to excel in sport? The message is that the path to excellence requires someone to become a true athlete; a motivated and highly skilled player that is durable. For this, a child should be involved in multiple sport experiences; and the sooner the better.

So when a well-meaning advisor suggests the road to sport success involves year-round training in anything; if they suggest more competition and sport specific training, be very careful you are focused on the real prize; developing a child who is competent at many things, confident to try new activities and motivated to engage in many different sports.

Sport Aurora, Activate Aurora and the Town Municipal Recreation Department are moving towards a multi-sport focus to help kids develop fundamental movement skills and the confidence to participate. To learn more about this, please contact us at info@activateaurora.ca and feel free to follow me on Twitter @ronweese