

**Case Study 9: After practice, your child's coach tells you your child has great potential and should specialize, eschewing other sports and training year-round on a club team. The coach says your child can be a standout in high school (and possibly beyond) and will be best served by specializing in this sport. As a Second-Goal Parent, what should you do?**

As I speak to parents around the country, I am more often asked about the pressure they feel to have their child specialize in one sport than any other issue. Often the question is asked in a way that suggests parents feel they have no choice but to acquiesce to the pressure, or their child will fall behind. In assessing whether to have your child specialize or not, your objective should be to determine what makes most sense in the long run for your child's athletic and personal development and for your family, since club sports generally are expensive and require substantial time commitments, including travel.

Here are some thoughts about the decision to specialize (or not):

**Consider the right age for specialization.** Dan Gould of Michigan State's Institute for the Study of Youth Sports says the problem isn't specialization, but premature specialization. Most athletes who attain an elite level specialize, but it is much later than many coaches and parents believe. The research indicates that for most sports, specialization before the age of 12 is not a good idea. And many believe playing multiple sports until 14 or 15 is an even better idea.

**Multiple sports help.** If your only goal is to shape your child into a great athlete (which I don't recommend), you would have your child play multiple sports. There are many examples of professional athletes who say their success in their ultimately-chosen sport was enhanced by playing other sports until a pretty advanced age. General sports skills such as balance and game sense can be enhanced by playing other sports. And by playing multiple sports until the teenage years, your child will be better able to identify the sport she really loves and can excel in.

**Realize coaches' conflict of interest.** Relying on the advice of a coach, no matter how successful or skilled he or she may be, is inadequate. Coaches

may have a conflict of interest – building a winning program, operating a profitable business, or a bias toward specialization – that can skew their perceptions.

**Beware the dangers of specialization.** While year-round focus on a single sport may speed up the acquisition of skills, there are dangers that can outweigh that advantage. Chief among these are burnout and overuse injuries. There are few activities that don't get old when you do them all the time. Year-round specialization makes burnout more likely. Repetitive stress injuries also increase with specialization. Whereas kids playing multiple sports get sore *muscles* at the beginning of the season, athletes who specialize early tend to develop increasingly sore and often damaged *tendons* and *joints* all year long from repetitive use with little rest. The shocking increase in overuse injuries among youth athletes in recent years is a testament to this.

**Include your child in the decision.** I am much more open to specialization when the child is the one driving the decision. If a child says he wants to focus on a single sport year round, he will be less likely to burn out, for example. Depending on the age of the child, involving him in this decision can be a learning experience. Learning to weigh the pluses and minuses of important decisions is a life lesson. I recommend this even if you ultimately decide against your child's inclination. Hearing him and considering his desires will strengthen your relationship much more than you deciding without his input.

**It's up to you.** Here's the bottom line: no one can advocate as effectively for your child as you. Resist pressure from coaches and other parents (and perhaps even your child) and make what you think is the best decision for your child and your family. While specialization may make sense for some kids who are passionate about a sport, joining a year-round club team requires a significant financial and time commitment by the family. Some families consider time traveling to and from practice and far-away tournaments as quality family time, while others find it disruptive and onerous. Ultimately you – and only you – are in the position to determine what's right for your child and your family.

# POSITIVE SPORTS PARENTING

How “Second-Goal” Parents Raise Winners in Life Through Sports



By Jim Thompson



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