

By Mike Boyle

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There was a great article in the NY times about Elena Delle Donna,

http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/19/sports/ncaabasketball/19athlete.html?_r=1&oref=slogin

It prompted me to post an old article I wrote. PS- Youth sports

is a mess we may never be able to clean up,

kind of like the economy.

Early Specialization

I'm not sure when the phenomenon of early specialization was born.

At some point a parent decided

“why not just fast-track our kids right past Little League and Pop

Warner and right into the Pros”. Parents in all sports felt

they could follow the lead of Earl Woods (Tiger's dad)

or Richard Williams (Venus and Serena's dad) and

just concentrate on one sport. I love to tell parent groups

that I speak to that for every Tiger Woods

or Venus Williams there are probably 5000 kids who hate

sports and resent their parents for all the pressure.

As a parent, ask yourself this question. Have you ever told

anyone “ I don't push _(insert your child's name)_____ he/she

really wants to do this?” The latest one to fuel the early

specialization fire is tennis star Maria Sharapova.

The TV folks couldn't wait to tell us at Wimbledon that she had been holed up in Fla since age 7.

Check out this quote from LA Lakers Coach Phil Jackson:

“40 million kids play sports, and most of them are between 7 and 12. By the time they are 13 more than 70 percent of them have stopped playing because it's not fun anymore. All of a sudden when kids get into junior high, we feel this need to have them become professionals, and the coaches become professionals... The message I'd like to get out to them is to honor the game. The goal, or the victory is important, but team sportsmanship, the athletic endeavor itself is just as important.”

One of the problems is that most team sports are what are called **late specialization sports**. This means that early concentration/ specialization has actually been shown to slow development rather than speed it up.

Historically the great players in team sports seem to hone their competitive instincts and develop their athleticism in a number of sports and then begin to specialize in their teens. In addition early specialization often leads to dysfunctional parent/ child relationships.

The early search for the Holy Grail places undue pressure

on a young athlete who should be learning that sports are actually fun, not just about winning. Believe it or not, kids play for fun and, will actually attempt to make the teams fair and encourage competition when left to their own devices. Remember when you were a kid and the teams were uneven. You made trades to create a competitive game. The thrill was competition, not winning.

For many youth sport parents the idea of fair teams is an anomaly. Stack the team. Get the best players. Annihilate the competition. Get a scholarship.

Make money. Lets look at the following examples

Nomar Garciaparra (Boston Red Sox)- played football, soccer and baseball in high school. He actually attempted to play football as a kicker while on a baseball scholarship at Georgia Tech

Mia Hamm (All Time Leading scorer in US soccer history)- multi-sport star in high school

Kristine Lilly (Leads the World in International Soccer Appearances)- captained three sports at Wilton, Conn HS.

Brendan Shanhan (Detroit Red Wings) outstanding Lacrosse player prior to entering the NHL.

Katie King- (US Women's Ice Hockey, two time Olympian, current Boston College Women's Hockey head Coach)

played both Ice Hockey and Softball at Brown University in Providence, R.I..

And the list could go on forever. Early specialization is a phenomenon created by self-interested and financially motivated adults. It has little basis in fact and, the data seem to support the opposite. This is just some parental food for thought. There is no evidence to support the theory that early specialization leads to long-term success. In fact, there is evidence to the contrary as stated above. If you want your child to be a great athlete, don't focus on one sport, play a different sport each season. The people who encourage early specialization are all people with a financial interest in your child playing one sport year round. Those encouraging early specialization usually run the leagues, camps and skill sessions and they fill the parents full of ideas that have no basis in fact. None of the players mentioned above left home at 14 to go to prep school or, just played one sport from age 6. The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting the result to change. Maybe we should just try the way that

worked in the first place?

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