

THE SPORTS DOCTOR – Young athletes specialize in one sport or many – good question

So often young athletes are faced with the question regarding concentrating on their main sport versus playing multiple sports. Today it's not unusual to see kids younger than 13 who are already putting all their efforts into one sport. The multiple-sport athlete is far less common today than years ago.

Some of the thinking by coaches and parents is that the young athlete will tend to fall behind if they play different sports instead of just one sport year-round.

This is a good question with no exact answer. Here are some factors that can help make the decision. Physically, with young, growing bodies, playing the same sport with the same movements, same muscles being used, same stress to the same areas, is challenging. Overuse injuries in the upper and lower extremities are a problem.

It is important to include off-sport conditioning that will help develop all areas of the athlete's body to counteract repetitive motion problems. Concentrate on working "the opposites," or areas and muscles that counteract repetitive motion areas. Athletic trainers, physical therapists and coaches can help develop those strategies.

Off-sport conditioning is no less important to the multiple sport athlete. Balance exercises and foot and ankle strengthening are a must, regardless of the sport.

Tennis, gymnastics, swimming, soccer, figure skating, volleyball and dance are examples of sports where specialization starts very young. My thinking is if the kid's interest is really that one sport, then it's OK to specialize. But don't let the coach convince you that that's the only way to become really good and possibly get that scholarship, etc. It isn't. Many of our best college and pro athletes played multiple sports as kids.

Either way, make sure your young athlete enjoys his or her sport and is not being physically or mentally burned out because of the constant demand. Even serious one-sport kids require time off and proper recovery—more is not always better.

At the same time, things happen. Acute injuries can be so unexpected, in or outside of sports. Getting immediate evaluation and care is important; it's why I always appreciate the critical role of athletic trainers being able to evaluate what happened and what to do about an acute injury.

The trainer can also be the youngster's best help with persistent overuse injuries. Paying attention to what the problem is, what areas are involved, and proper strengthening or changes in technique might be involved. As I've stated in previous articles, if overuse injuries are persistent in the lower extremities, pay attention to foot type and mechanics. So often it's the flat pronated feet, the high arches, bowed legs, knock knees, etc., that are the related root cause of these injuries and addressing them with custom orthotics is very

helpful. Screenings for these free foot and postural imbalances continue at my Aurora office...630-898-3505...Take advantage!

Dr. Robert Weil is a sports podiatrist with an office in Aurora. You can hear him on his weekly radio shows at 6:30 p.m. Thursdays on 90.9-FM. Contact him at drweilsportsdoctor@yahoo.com and check out his website www.sportsdoctorradio.com.