

WHAT EVERY SOCCER COACH **NEEDS TO KNOW**

ABOUT PLAYING OTHER SPORTS

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In 2004, I wrote an article for Soccer Journal titled "Single Sport or Multiple?" I had a hunch back then, as a young graduate student, that the culture of youth sports was changing. As I reported from my first study, soccer parents believed then that there was a trend toward earlier specialization and attributed it to factors such as pressure from parents and coaches, as well as greater opportunity to develop skills.

Years later, as a professor, soccer coach, and "soccer mom," I am more certain than ever that children are specializing in sport earlier and with more frequency. The trend was recently confirmed by the International Olympic Committee (IOC). The youth sports culture has changed, yet the outcomes are not any different. An estimated 5% of high school athletes go on to compete in NCAA Divisions I, II, and III. Only 1-2% of those high school athletes earn an athletic scholarship. These percentages have remained roughly the same over the past 15 years even though participation has increased (NFHS, NCAA). The likelihood of playing college soccer is commensurate with the 5% annual average for all sports. The question remains: why are children prematurely deciding between sports, if the likelihood of playing college soccer remains the same?

My own young children think they want to play soccer in college someday. When I reflect on my family's spring sports season, I can't help but picture the color-coded family calendar which highlights the many soccer, lacrosse, and baseball events for my four children. I coached two soccer teams, while my husband coached both baseball and lacrosse. If I were to look back a few months further, I would see the soccer scheduled around hockey, basketball, and swimming. Across my four children, we are a multi-sport family in an increasingly specialized world. However, sports, and soccer in particular, are what my kids love to do. My husband and I are willing to keep up the juggling act so our children can sample a wide variety of sports before turning their attention to a select few. Notice I said "few" and not "single." Not yet.

Our oldest is only 10-years old, but the athletic decision-making has already begun. Friends and teammates all decided between lacrosse and baseball this spring, doing one or the other, not both. We opted to hold off on that decision another year, giving our son a chance to grow and develop in both sports a little longer. He will also start club soccer this year, which we know will change everything.

One of our primary concerns with club soccer is the potential pressure to specialize early in a single sport. Why is it that

clubs, coaches, and parents encourage kids to specialize at all? The basic premise of specialization in sport is that the increased time and dedication to a single sport will enable a player to reach his or her peak potential—when in reality neither research nor practice truly validate a specialized approach. Yet more and more club soccer coaches are encouraging children to specialize in soccer earlier and more frequently. There are important points every soccer coach needs to know about talent development, specialization, and multiple sports participation.

Before you write me off as just another opinionated "soccer mom," please know that I have stood on the sidelines right where you are...at the college, high school, and club levels. Now as I start my coaching career all over again with my own children, I feel a strong obligation to get it right this time. As both a parent and researcher in the field of youth sport specialization, I am especially mindful of my children's athletic decision-making—and I think every other soccer coach out there should be, as well. Whether you are the longtime club coach who is ready to reflect on your past experiences and redefine how you move forward or the young club coach still developing your approach—there is plenty to learn about long-term athletic development.

To begin with, one of the theories that added momentum to the specialization trend was Malcolm Gladwell's *Outliers* (2011). The theme of the book is that 10,000 hours of deliberate practice leads to mastery in a given field. Less known is the fact that some of this research was conducted in office settings with tasks like typing or for musicians with instruments. Soccer and many other sports are not as scripted as music, or office tasks. A 2015 meta-analysis by Princeton University researchers suggested that deliberate practice predicted performance very differently by domain. As might be expected, practice in the sport domain only accounted for an 18% variance. It takes more than time on task to make a successful athlete. Specialization in sport is often seen as committing more time on a specific set of tasks. Other than "more is better," what theory are coaches basing their athletic recommendations on?

To answer these critical questions, let's examine: (1) what is happening now in youth soccer; (2) what is known about long-term development; and (3) what can coaches do now to support long-term development of soccer players?

WHAT'S HAPPENING NOW IN YOUTH SOCCER?

The reality is that the club soccer system greatly impacts youth sports culture. The club soccer system sets the tone for a child's entire youth sports experience by setting expectations, dictating schedules, and influencing parents. I am not anti-club soccer in general. My own children will start playing club soccer soon. However, I am cautious about monetizing youth sports in a system that may not be focused on player development or long-term athletic development.

While every club soccer experience is different, there are some common trends in our community which likely generalize to other areas. In our region, there are upwards of a dozen club soccer options—which has completely diluted the talent pool. The competition between the local clubs is primarily focused on the various clubs staying afloat, rather than player development and long-term success.

Years ago, when club soccer first began in our area, there was one club and the best few players from every town, in each age group, made the teams. The teams were full of talent and were competitive across the state. Many of us went on to play soccer in college. Since the inception of club soccer in our community, much has changed.

The growth of our local club soccer structure was expected. Presently, club soccer programs often offer many positive attributes such as: well-trained coaches, better competition, curriculum standards, upward mobility, nicer training facilities, and more. What's not to love?

The downside is that some clubs and coaches are sending inaccurate messages to parents and players regarding some key areas of athletic development: player development, specialization, competition, and commitments. Perhaps some of these messages resonate in your club?

PLAYER DEVELOPMENT

- ▶ **Early Starters:** Soccer has become one of the earliest entry sports, with children starting to play organized soccer younger than ever before. An earlier start in soccer has resulted in earlier attempts at talent identification and earlier dropout rates. Our local clubs go so far as to offer club soccer for four year olds. Need I say more? As the mother of four boys, I can attest that four year olds have no business in club soccer! It is more important for children to have free play experiences at preschool ages than to get into the club soccer system prematurely. Conversely, a middle-school-aged child who wants to begin club soccer will likely be behind the curve. A shift toward developmentally appropriate timing will be discussed with other best practices.
- ▶ **Early Bloomers:** The club soccer system is also designed to identify the early bloomer. Players who stand out early on get noticed. Players who are gradually building skills and good habits draw less attention. The tendency is to identify talent rather than identify potential. We will discuss how it is imperative to cultivate both talent and potential over time.

SPECIALIZATION

Many clubs and coaches encourage players to specialize in soccer. Also, in an effort to retain membership and employ coaches year-round, clubs are also offering soccer opportunities on a year-round basis. The message is that more time playing soccer will lead to improved performance. However, year-round participation and early specialization may also lead to overuse injuries and athletic burnout. The subsequent section will explore the research on specialization and how early sport specialization is not necessarily a requirement for success at the highest levels of competition (AOSSM, 2016).

COMPETITION

A competitive climate also happens earlier now, which leads to a premature focus on winning, records, and standings. Club coaches should not measure their impact by a U9 team's record but in the manner in which each player has been prepared for the next level. Another facet of the club soccer environment is traveling to compete. Suggestions will be provided for maximizing local competition and creating an atmosphere where players can play at their optimal challenge level for less money, time, and distance.

COMMITMENTS

Club soccer tends to be one of the first major athletic commitments a family makes for their player. Because of the personal and financial investment, a club soccer experience quickly becomes a balancing act for a player with other sports and extra-curricular activities. The family calendar rapidly fills with trainings, games, and tournaments. It is the club and coaches who often send the message about the level of commitment expected.

Years ago, there was the notion of "keeping up with the Joneses" in every aspect of life, including youth sports. Certainly, plenty of soccer parents are still trying to keep pace with others regardless of the best interest of their own children. However, a newly coined pop-culture term, "FOMO" the Fear Of Missing Out, better describes what is happening now in youth sports. Soccer parents have FOMO. Parents are afraid to turn down an opportunity out of fear of missing out. This modern-day condition leads to overscheduled children who are more susceptible to athletic burnout and overuse injuries. Interestingly, there are more regulations on how often NCAA athletes can train and compete than children. The only real gatekeepers to children's participation in sports are parents. As coaches, we have the power to influence these parents.

WHAT IS KNOWN ABOUT LONG-TERM ATHLETIC DEVELOPMENT?

Recently, more attention has been given to the process of athletic development and talent identification. While there is no single recipe for success, governing bodies, medical professionals, and academic researchers have compiled the available research from around the world. The IOC (2015) contends that "empirical evidence shows that a diversity of activities (including variations of play and practice) in early

development is an indicator of continued involvement in more intense activities later in life, elite performance and continued participation in sport." Furthermore, the IOC suggests that coaches are responsible for athlete development systems which provide "opportunities for peak athlete performance, promote lifelong participation and shape personal development." As coaches, it is our responsibility to base our methods on empirical research and best practices.

SPECIALIZATION RESEARCH

As previously noted, there is a trend toward earlier specialization in soccer. In a consensus statement, the IOC (2015) calls specialization a contemporary phenomenon which has led to an increase in competitiveness and professionalism within youth sport. Among the consequences of early specialization are documented health issues such as increases in overuse injuries, overtraining, and athletic burnout. Conversely, the IOC states that diverse exposure and sports sampling, "enhance motor development and athletic capacity, reduce injury risk and increase the opportunity for the child to discover the sport(s) that he/she will enjoy and excel at."

In addition to the findings from the IOC, the American Orthopedic Society for Sports Medicine (AOSSM, 2016) conducted a comprehensive review of the available literature. The AOSSM states that "youth specialization before the age of 12 years is associated with increased burnout and dropout rates and decreased athletic development over time. More importantly, there is a lack of evidence that early specialization is necessary for adult elite performance." In fact, in a comparison of training profiles of elite vs. non-elite soccer players, differences were not evident until age 15. Findings suggest that high volumes of deliberate practice during childhood are not a requirement for elite performance (despite the popularity of the 10,000 hours theory). Instead, the AOSSM recommends a gradual transition from deliberate play, to deliberate practice, while sampling a variety of sports, and then focusing on a primary sport. Specialization is not recommended until after the age of 13 when athletes have the proper motor and cognitive foundation. Among the other valuable suggestions, the AOSSM also reiterates the importance of age-appropriate strength and conditioning, neuromuscular training, and free play.

As previously noted, although the trend is toward earlier and more frequent specialization, the data regarding the likelihood of playing soccer or another sport in college remains relatively constant. In related research conducted by the NCAA (2015), there were some fascinating findings about the youth sports experiences of collegiate student-athletes. Over 90% of soccer players began playing by the age of nine (not preschool!). The majority of soccer players studied played both club soccer and high school soccer (males = 93% and females = 95%). The study also tracked the percentage of soccer players by division who specialized in soccer by the age of 12.

The data reported by the NCAA student-athletes does not suggest that either specialization or exclusively playing club soccer are requirements for collegiate success. The NCAA survey concluded that "student-athletes in many sports played that sport year-round growing up and participated in the sport on both club and high school teams. Many NCAA athletes think youth in their sport play in too many contests and a number of them (especially men) wish they had spent more time sampling

other sports when they were young."

On a smaller scale, I have conducted my own retrospective research on collegiate student-athletes (Pantuosco-Hensch, 2004; 2006; 2010). In my recent study of an NCAA Division III soccer program, I gathered similar data using my Youth Sports Participation Questionnaire. On average, the college soccer players reportedly began playing soccer by age five and went on to play year-round between the ages of nine and 10. The mean age of specialization was between 14-15 years old, with some student-athletes still participating in more than one collegiate sport.

Percentage of NCAA Soccer Players Who Specialized in Soccer by Age 12

NCAA Division	Males	Females
Division I	68%	62%
Division II	67%	64%
Division III	59%	57%

When responding to Likert scale items, college soccer players generally agreed that specialization contributes to high skills, making a college team, and earning a scholarship. The college soccer players did not believe that specialization contributed to athletic burnout. Interestingly, the college soccer players studied did not report pressure from parents or coaches to specialize in sport. When asked whether or not specialization is necessary for collegiate sports success, 50% of males and 55% of females said "no" it was not necessary to specialize in soccer.

The perceptions of student-athletes are important to consider if a goal is to prepare young soccer players for the college level. Coaches have an opportunity to support player growth and development using this feedback to inform their practices. Most college soccer players did not specialize early as children. They do report year-round participation as part of the process toward focusing on soccer as a primary sport.

In summary, the available research at the international, national, and collegiate levels provides similar findings and themes regarding long-term athletic development and the role of specialization. The data provides some age ranges to guide player development. The research also provides some basis for training volume and methods. Overall, the consensus is that athletic development is a long-term process, with many contributing factors. In addition to sport specialization or sampling aspects of long-term athletic development, it is also important to consider what is known about developmental timelines.

ATHLETIC TIMELINE

There are many clichés about timing being everything, but in youth sports it really holds true. Despite getting an earlier start in sport, the window of opportunity is narrowing for youth sports participation. Statistically, most children drop out of organized sports between the ages of 11 and 13. This holds true for soccer as well. Most kids don't make it past 13 years old in competitive soccer. What this means is that somewhere

between when children begin soccer and enter middle school, their soccer fate is being determined. The unfortunate catch here is that most athletes do not peak before high school. Any retrospective look at accomplished athletes' careers reminds us that athletic development is a longer-term process. The IOC notes that current talent development systems often favor early bloomers, which is not the athletic population who is most likely to succeed at the elite level.

Currently, players are being weeded out of the system before they've even come close to reaching their athletic potential. What often happens is that players are cut prematurely or relegated to the B team. Something needs to change if we, as coaches, want to develop athletes who peak at the right time and reach their optimal potential. As for what the "right time" is, that is certainly up for debate. My contention is that setting players up for successful high school and club soccer experiences is a realistic goal. This requires a perspective that sees beyond the weekend games, the season results, or the upcoming evaluations. The mid- to long-term perspective has value and needs to be emphasized during the developmental years. Next, various strategies for maximizing athletic development beyond the short term will be provided.

WHAT CAN COACHES DO TO SUPPORT LONG-TERM DEVELOPMENT OF YOUNG SOCCER PLAYERS?

Coaches have a unique and powerful role in the lives of their soccer players. Fortunately, there is a great deal coaches can do to promote long-term athletic development in soccer players.

My sister and I both coach several soccer teams in our community. Together, we've been effectively implementing our research-based strategies at various ages and stages. Solutions include: (1) develop well-rounded athletes; (2) promote free play; (3) create optimal challenge; (4) add fitness and injury prevention; (5) encourage multiple sports participation; (6) cultivate talent and potential; (7) emphasize player development; and (8) promote coaching education.

1. Develop Well-Rounded Athletes

It is increasingly important to develop well-rounded athletes, complete with mental, physical, and life skills. Include mental skills such as goal-setting, visualization, and positive self-talk in your coaching routine. When building physical skills, emphasize the transferable skills between sports. For instance, I often equate the footwork used in soccer defending to that of basketball. Intentionally include all-purpose physical fitness skills in your training sessions. Any of the basics like push-ups, sit-ups, squats, or lunges are beneficial. In light of our busy, often over-scheduled lives, life-skill development is critical as well. Sports are an ideal setting to learn important life skills such as time management, problem solving, and decision-making. Take the time to teach these skills to your soccer players. With young children, start with basic responsibilities such as bringing a ball and water bottle to practice. Over time, players will have the opportunity to broaden their repertoire of skills which will lead to increased confidence and success over the long term.

2. Promote Free Play

One of my family's favorite movies is "The Sandlot." It's a childhood classic that reminds us of the importance of

neighborhood pick-up games. One of the criticisms of youth sport is how adult-driven the process has become. Somewhere along the line, youth sports went from unstructured sandlots to structured leagues. A combination of the two is key for athletic development. Through free play, children have fun, learn to be creative, and build a variety of skills. Experts suggest that free play is critical for healthy motor development, including fine motor skills, core strength, agility, balance, and coordination. Free play and pick-up games build intrinsic motivation to practice and compete—which is helpful for long-term athletic development.

One way I like to balance free play with structure is to organize a tournament day with a few age groups in our town. I usually combine half a dozen teams, mixing the players into random small-sided teams. We play a round robin tournament with a playoff for fun. We do this all in a few hours at our local fields. Children get to play in a low-pressure environment against a range of competition, and at no financial cost. These games are every bit as fun as the backyard, with the benefit of some subtle coaching and guidance.

3. Create Optimal Challenge

Another benefit to my pick-up tournament days is creating an optimal challenge for various players. By combining ages and abilities, children can compete in challenging situations. When players are challenged, yet still successful, they are more likely to remain motivated. In fact, I recommend considering "play up" policies for children who are ready for a challenge. My kindergarten son will play up an age group in our town where he fits best, rather than prematurely playing travel or club soccer. He will get the benefits of small-sided games and a little more competition—without the travel, expense, or hazards of more players per-side (our travel league still does 8v8 for the youngest age groups). I also recommend having talented girls play on boys' teams to create an optimal challenge. My eight-year-old niece plays on both boys' and girls' travel teams. She gets the competition she needs with the boys, but experiences the benefits of being a leader and playing with her friends on the girls' team. Soon she will make the transition to club soccer. By playing with the boys' team she has been able to appropriately pace her development for longer-term success.

Teams and clubs can do a better job of finding challenge within a geographical radius. The travel associated with club soccer is often ridiculous and expensive. A team shouldn't have to travel several states away to find appropriate competition. Get creative and find new ways to create competitive situations at home. Saving time and money can reduce the potential burden on players and families, which also supports long-term involvement.

More formally, clubs are accomplishing the objective of optimal challenge level through pool play. I advise creating a fluid situation where players can earn an opportunity to train or compete at a higher level. Having said that, it is also extremely important to cultivate B teams. We need capable coaches to support B teams so that players have a chance to continue to develop and build their skill set—with a genuine chance of becoming A team players. The hope is for later bloomers to continue building skills and not be disregarded by the system prematurely. In our town, we are working diligently to support B team participation and coaching.

COACHES HAVE THE POWER AND RESPONSIBILITY TO CREATE A YOUTH SPORTS CULTURE THAT PROMOTES FULL ATHLETIC DEVELOPMENT AND DOES NOT PREMATURELY PROMOTE SOCCER ONLY.

4. Add Fitness and Injury Prevention

In previous installments for *Soccer Journal*, I've written about both youth strength and conditioning, as well as ACL injury prevention. Both topics remain relative to long-term athletic development. Players will benefit from added physical fitness to the soccer training routine. Specifically, training can focus on locomotor skills which prevent injuries, like balance, coordination, and agility. Various forms of neuromuscular training enable players to learn to use their body more effectively and reduce injury rates at the same time. The American College of Sports Medicine has guidelines for youth strength and conditioning which coaches will find helpful. I often incorporate agility ladders, hurdles, and other fitness equipment into our soccer skill-based warm-ups. Working fitness and injury prevention into a warm-up routine tends to be effective and realistic for coaches and players.

5. Encourage Multiple Sports Participation

After considering the research, it is critical to put the findings into practice. There is no evidence that athletes should specialize before puberty or approximately age 12 to 13. Experts recommend sampling a variety of sports and following a step-wise progression toward a primary sport. Keep in mind there is a distinction between specialization and year-round participation. Often players balance soccer with other sports, not to the exclusion of other sports. Playing soccer intermittently throughout the year can be safe, if coaches and parents monitor for overtraining, overuse injuries, and athletic burnout. Take regular breaks from soccer (and other sports) to maintain health and motivation.

As I alluded to earlier, coaches have the power and responsibility to create a youth sports culture that promotes full athletic development and does not prematurely promote soccer only. Based on the Olympic and NCAA data, the approach suggested here may even lead to better, healthier, and happier soccer players in the long run. Make an effort to work the soccer schedule around other sports. A little extra communication and planning can go a long way.

6. Cultivate Talent and Potential

Experts agree that talent identification is no easy task. I suggest cultivating talent and potential. It's easy to be excited by an already-talented player. Talented players certainly deserve their spots on the roster. However, coaches should also make a concerted effort to identify potential. My eight year old is a great example. Right now, he is middle of the pack on his travel team. But, he's gradually building good habits, a solid skill set, and an athletic foundation. Right now, you might miss him in an evaluation as he tends to fly under the radar. The few players on our team who are more aggressive and ahead of the game developmentally are far more noticeable. But the reality is, I don't want my son to peak now anyway. The hope is to lay the groundwork for a successful future club and high school soccer experience in the years to come. The athletic timeline data reminds us to be mindful of later bloomers. By looking for players with future potential, coaches can build more successful soccer players over time.

7. Emphasize Player Development

In a world of scores, standings, and rankings, reminding coaches not to focus on winning is a tough sell. But with an emphasis on player development, coaches can keep winning in perspective. As coaches, consider each action or decision in light of the impact on player development. I appreciate the frustration in knowing that, as a coach, you could win every game if you only kept certain players in key positions and made substitutions commensurate with ability and so on. Remind yourself that your youth soccer record is not a reflection of your coaching ability. No one has ever earned a college scholarship or gone pro because their U8 team went undefeated. Instead, focus on improving each player so they are well prepared for the next season or level. Coaching habits such as equal playing time and rotating positions and responsibilities gives each child an opportunity to grow and develop over time. While easier said than done, taking an approach that extends beyond the scores of the weekend games will promote long-term athletic development and create better soccer players.

8. Promote Coaching Education

When I first taught on the United Soccer Coaches associate staff, courses were comprised of a dozen coaches from a town soccer association. In most towns like mine, the majority of young children are coached by volunteer parents. Educating the parent volunteers is key. With the growing world of club soccer, there is a greater emphasis on professional coaches. While professional coaches certainly have their advantages, volunteer coaches are a necessity for youth soccer programs in most towns. We should not forgo grassroots efforts to promote coaching education in our local communities. Coaching education, in person or online, should be emphasized. Town-based soccer programs have value for developing players as well. Players have the opportunity to represent their town and play with their friends. As a professional organization, educating soccer coaches at each level of play will contribute to more successful player development over time.

FINAL THOUGHTS

By better understanding the trends in youth soccer, coaches can approach coaching soccer as part of long-term athletic development. Learning from the available research on what leads to both international- and national-level success can inform our positions and practices on critical topics like youth sport specialization. My hope is that I've made a case against soccer-only policies and generated some enthusiasm around a more holistic approach to developing soccer players as long-term athletes. With my own children and the players I coach, I am very mindful of athletic decision-making. By using the suggestions shared here, my messages and actions are aligned with what I hope is in the best interest of each player. Ideally, each player will have an opportunity to reach his or her full potential at the optimal timing. In years to come, I will have the chance to look back and know if I got it right as both a soccer coach and a "soccer mom." ■