



THE COACHING YOU

Is It Important to Discourage Sport Specialization?

by Dennis A. Johnson, EdD

"The first questions I'll ask about a kid are, What other sports does he play? What does he do? What are his positions? Is he a big hitter in baseball? Is he a pitcher? Does he play hoops? All of those things are important to me. I hate that kids don't play three sports in high school. I think that they should play year-round and get every bit of it that they can through that experience. I really, really don't favor kids having to specialize in one sport."

(Pete Carroll, former USC, and current Seattle Seahawks coach) (1)

So should we as coaches discourage wrestlers from sport specialization? Prior to answering that question, it is important to define what age group we are discussing and what the research dictates

NWCA Coaching
Development Blog

Scholastic Program Wrestling Coaches:

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in terms of long-term athletic development. In addition, is it the child or the parent who wants the specialization?

On a personal note and prior to delving into research, let me relate my wrestling experience from 1984 that was part of tour-study program in the Soviet Union. I spent 17 days in Moscow, learning the tactical/technical aspects of the Soviet system designed to produce peak performances every year at the world championships and an ultimate peak every four years at the Olympics. The Soviets were the best in the world at that time and indicated their wrestlers did not specialize in wrestling until around the age of 16 and felt they could compete and become world champions within 4 years.

This personal reflection aligns with the current research findings on the topic of long-term athletic development and sport specialization. Generally, in sports such as wrestling which are dependent on physical maturity, a child should not consider specialization until at least late adolescence (around age 15-16). At this stage, athletes have developed the physical, cognitive, social, emotional, and motor skills needed to invest in highly specialized training (2).

In childhood and early adolescence, sampling of a number of sports should be encouraged. Early diversification (i.e., sampling) is linked to longer sport careers and allows for participation in a number of contexts that allow for positive youth development. Also, high amounts of deliberate

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play in various sport settings allow for a range of physical and mental experiences that children can use later in their sport of choice (we hope wrestling). Finally, research indicates that sampling will not hinder elite sport participation (2).

In sum as an academician, I might suggest that wrestlers play all kind of sports through high school as Pete Carrol suggests. However, as a wrestling coach, I would also suggest that in addition to playing other sports they might also want to focus on our sport in some manner throughout the year.

Whatever the decision; the emphasis should always be to “have fun” and “find a way.”

References:

1. Hess, J. (2015). Youth Sports: Examining the pros and cons of sport specialization. Ridgeview Medical Center.
2. Cote, J., Lidor, R., & Hackfort, D. (2009). ISSP position stand: To sample or to specialize? Seven postulates about youth sport activities that lead to continued participation and elite performance. *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 9, 7, 17.

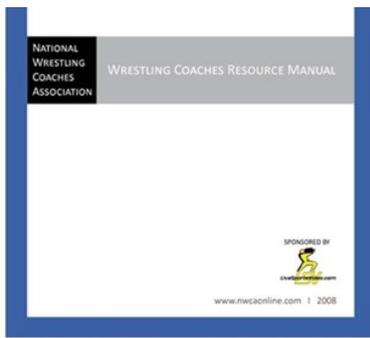


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