Benefits of Participating in Two Sports

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Sports are an integral part of a child's physical as well as psychological and emotional growth. They not only build athletic skills and promote physical growth but also build character, leadership skills, analytical thinking, risk-taking and strategic thinking. And participation in multiple sports accelerates and polishes these processes even further. There have been multiple examples of professional and unprofessional athletes who participated in multiple sports while growing up. These individuals, who participated in multiple sports, were able to achieve success in their future.

Multi-Sport Athletes and the Specialization Debate

The list of most popular multi-sport athletes of all time includes Jackie Robinson, Dave Debusschere, Keith Ericson, John Elway and many others. All these athletes made their names in the world of sports despite their participation in more than one sport. Multi-sport participation did not become a hindrance in the way of achieving excellence in any one game. Rather, it helped them polish their physical, athletic, motor, and social skills. Multi-sport participation versus specialization has been a topic of discussion in sports circles for a very long time. The contention is based on the premise that specialization in a single sport enhances prospects for athletes. The second group supports multi-sport participation on the premise that it not only helps develop the athlete's physical skills as an athlete but also promotes his social, emotional and other motor skills growth. This essay contends that two-sport athletes are physically and psychologically more tuned and healthy and thus have better prospects in the future.

Athletic Versatility and Recruitment Opportunities

Many sports coaches believe that, for an athlete, it is a good idea to participate in multiple sports because it may help them to enhance their sports skills, which not only help them to perform better on the ground but also make their future bright. The football coach at the former University of Southern California said,

"I want participants that are so competitive, and so special athletically that they can compete in multiple sports" (Curtis pg.1).

This statement of the coach shows that the athletes who participate in multiple sports can perform better as athletes, and so they get better chances in the future. Participation in multiple sports makes

them valuable recruits. Moreover, it has also been observed that when awards and scholarships are distributed amongst athletes, the coaches focus on the importance of athletic versatility, which indicates that somewhere, it is important for the athlete to participate in multiple sports. Also, the athlete who has athletic versatility or has been a participant in multiple sports is considered more talented, and so he becomes a better recruiting prospect.

Preventing Overuse Injuries Through Multiple Sports

One of the reasons why many coaches stress participation in multiple sports is that it reduces the risk of overuse injuries, which many athletes face when they engage in a single sport for long hours and tighter schedules. The reason is that when an athlete engages in one single sport for a long time, one or more sets of joints become subjected to overuse, which results in subsequent injury. Almost all sports include the overuse of one set of joints. For example, baseball players often get injuries in their elbows. They have to go through Tommy John surgeries to repair the ligaments in their elbows. Football players get low-back pain because of overuse. Another injury common in football players is patellar tendinitis (knee pain) (Levine & Owens).

These overuse sports injuries can be prevented by cutting short the time and duration of participation in one single sport. And the best way to do that is to engage in other sports as well, as it helps keep the body in athletic mode, enhancing athletic skills while reducing the risk of overuse injuries at the same time. According to Coakley (1992), early specialization in kids has also been linked to dropping out, burnout and injury (70-93% more likely injured) (qt in Valley). Overuse is not just a physical thing but a mental one as well. And it can have a negative impact on the psychological development of the athletes.

Physical, Emotional, and Social Development

Bill Bruno et al. (2013) presented their study about the participation of healthier athletes in multiple sports and its effect on their future. In their research, they discussed that successful athletes do not rely only on a single sport. Rather, they also participate in other sports to keep them healthier and fit to face the obstacles as athletes. Most people think that specialization in one sport can make the athlete a better sportsman, but Bruno et al., in their research, discussed that it is not specialization that makes an athlete ready for his future. Rather, participation in multiple sports can help him. Multiple-sport participation not only makes the athlete’s muscles strong but also helps him to overcome the issue of physical overuse. They concluded that participation in two sports or more could help the athlete to be fit not only physically but also emotionally and enable him to prove his worth on the ground (Bruno and Bruno).

Two-sport or multi-sport athletes also have better social and emotional growth. The participants,

when engaging in one single sport for a very long time, put themselves under a lot of pressure. Since the aim of engaging in one sport over a long time is specialization, the fear of failing to gain the desired success also increases anxiety and pressure, thus affecting their emotional health. Those who tackle the pressure and anxiety in a positive way can channel this energy into their work. But, many times, players fail to cope with the negative feelings successfully, thus leading to depression. This affects their athletic skills and performance. Adolescents who participate in multiple sports have healthier psychological profiles (Valley).

Similarly, if sports help develop leadership skills, team spirit, and fair play, on the one hand, on the other hand, they can sometimes bolster the competitive spirit on a negative scale, thus giving rise to jealousy and animosity among the rivals (Ghildiyal). While the same can or cannot happen in a scenario of multi-sport participation, the chances are that the athletes may learn to play sports for the sake of fun beyond the fear and pressure of specialization and above the worries of making a successful future. This helps them have a more liberal outlook on their skills and potential, as well as those of their fellow players.

This, in turn, enhances their performance, boosts their confidence and has a healthier impact on their emotional development. Multi-sport athletes also get to widen their social circle. By participating in multiple sports, they meet and interact with different groups of people. Each group of people has its group-specific norms and customs. Thus, they get a chance to work on their social skills, which they often miss out on in specialization courses. In specialized training programs, the schedules are tight, and participants hardly get any chance to engage in social life outside their small circle of fellow players. Thus, by engaging in multiple sports, athletes get a chance to polish another of their skills, that is, social skills, which help them build a successful career in the future in or outside the field of sports.

Motor Skills and Physical Literacy

As stated earlier, multi-sport participation allows for free time to play; it also makes athletes more creative. Through the development of their other motor skills, athletes develop physical literacy, which helps them perform better and reduces the risk of injuries. Robin S. Vealey, Ph.D., talks about the development of physical literacy and motor skills in her article “Athlete Development Through Multiple Sports Participation.” She starts her arguments by debunking the myth that early specialization in kids helps develop their motor skills. According to her, early specialization helps in the development of motor skills for some kids only in some sports. She further says that some children can diversify early and still attain success in most sports as adults.

According to the Mountain of Motor Skills Development presented by Clarke and Metcalf (2002) and revised by Vealey and Chase (2016), children must engage in multiple sports to polish their motor skills, which would help them develop physical literacy subsequently necessary in performing specific sports (Valley). If a child successfully develops his motor skills, it would make his movements well

coordinated, mechanically efficient, controlled and often automatic. The set of motor skills that an athlete must develop as a child includes throw, catch, kick, run, jump, dribble, punt, fall, hop, slide, trap, leap, strike, skip, gallop, roll and dodge (Valley). As is apparent, this skill set cannot be learned by engaging in one sport only. Participation in two or multiple sports is significant as a child, even if the athlete intends to specialize in one particular game as an adult. For example, David Leadbetter talks about one of his students whom he coached since age 12, saying:

[He] has had a solid career, but he hasn't achieved what some thought he might. I feel that part of the problem is that he only played golf growing up. That hurts him. In other ball games, you develop a feel for throwing and distance. He never did that. He doesn't have the instinctive touch or hand-eye coordination you need to hit the ball on close-in shots. If only he'd played baseball or basketball as a kid. That would have helped him (Qt in Valley).

This quote by David Leadbetter shows that those players who play more than one sport have better motor functions and also gain better physical literacy, which is indispensable to achieving success in sports.

Janine Tucker, the coach at Johns Hopkins University, also talks about the better motor-skill development of athletes who participate in multiple games, thus having a better chance of recruitment. She says:

We prefer multi-sport athletes for the diversity of skill sets that they have developed. One of the first questions we ask recruits is, "Do you play basketball?" Then, they understand angles, footwork, and how to get low on defense. We also love soccer players because they can run all day. (Qt in Valley).

Reducing Burnout and Preserving Athletic Motivation

As opposed to athletes who specialize in a specific sport, those who play multiple sports have a reduced chance of burnout. Premature training can decrease the chances of falling in love with a sport for an athlete (Valley). Nicole Garrett et al. talk about the role of multi-sport participation in the development of an athlete in their article "Variations in Adolescent Engagement in Sports and its Influence on Positive Youth Development" (Holt 9). In their report, they studied a total of 1122 adolescents out of the original 3500 male as well as female participants to study the impact of sports on youth development. One of their research questions was to find out the influence of changing patterns of engagement in various sports on the development of different groups of young people.

Though the researchers concluded that the relationship between participation and adolescent functioning is complex, changing patterns of engagement result in greater interest and participation (Holt 21); this study by Garrett et al. supports the original contention of this paper that multi-sport participation enhances the success rate for athletes. It increases the active play engagement of the

athletes, thereby increasing their physical literacy. While those who play only one sport are at a greater risk of burnout, those who play multiple sports stay involved in physical activities for a longer time without getting bored.

James Boyd, the head coach and General Manager of the Ontario Hockey League Mississauga Steelheads, also talks about engaging in multiple sports to avoid the risk of burnout. Talking about his sports kit, he says that football, a few baseball gloves, and a pile of tennis balls are the things he always includes in his kit. According to him, hockey players must take a break now and then to avoid burnout and overuse. He says:

I think the players benefit from taking a break. You benefit from setting aside some time for yourself to recharge mentally, even if it is heading up to the cottage and sticking a fishing pole in the water (Toth 2).

And to maintain the passion for the game, taking breaks is also of utmost significance. However, these breaks, by no means, become an obstacle in the way of the success of an athlete.

A Broader Philosophy of Youth Sports

To conclude, this argument, it would be pertinent to say that multi-sport athletes have a better chance of future success as they are better adapted physically, physiologically, psychologically, and socially. Though specialization is the key to success, engaging in one single sport can become an obstacle in the very way of specialization itself. By making them participate in multiple sports, coaches can keep hold of the interest and active play engagement of the athletes. Sports are all about skills and performance, and, for an athlete, these skills can be achieved by participation in multiple sports. As shown by the research conducted by Valley, multiple-sport participation enhances the motor-skill development of kids, which is indispensable to their future physical literacy as adults.

This physical literacy helps them specialize in specific sports and achieve the level of excellence which ensures their success. Multiple-sport participation not only makes their muscles and bodies strong but also helps them enhance their emotional skills as athletes. The athletes who participate in two or more sports understand how to perform well on the ground, and for that, their bodies and brains support them. Multiple-sport participation makes them mentally and physically capable of becoming well-rounded athletes and enhancing their athletic networking. It reduces the anxiety and pressure that an athlete feels when he starts specialization training at an early age. The pressure often results in thwarting the interest and passion in the sport.

When the athlete is emotionally and physically well-rounded and well-tuned, he performs better on the ground. In turn, his performance opens the doors of success for him. From this study, it can be easily concluded that the reason behind the success of the best performances of athletes is their participation in multiple sports. This calls for a change in the sports philosophy of our educational institutes. They should promote participation in multiple sports. This would alleviate the pressure of

specialization from the students and help achieve the true purpose of participating in sports, which is recreation as well as physical and spiritual health.

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