

More youth play isn't a winner for everybody

Increased emphasis on developing elite players has brought side effects such as traumatic injuries and psychological burnout

By Dr. Richard Hinton, Special to The Baltimore Sun
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Over the past 50 years, we have gone from major league athletes with offseason jobs to young athletes with, often, no offseason at all, from parents sticking their heads out the back door to call their children home from play to parents rushing out the door for the next officially sanctioned event.

Historically, children have played sports for fun, with the wonderful byproduct of learning life's lessons. Today, achievement in a single sport seems to be the increasing focus. Some parents are choosing year-round lacrosse-only participation for their children long before they have experienced a wide range of other activities.

What exactly is the goal? If it is to teach all under-13 players to shoot as easily with their left as their right, maybe the intensity makes a little sense.

However, Richard Ginsburg, US Lacrosse sports psychology consultant and director of Harvard's Performance and Character Excellence in Sports (PACES) Institute, warns "this is an oversimplified concept in youth sports, particularly in team sports. It goes without question that effective practice improves skills performance, but a positive lacrosse experience involves a myriad of other variables."

Let's not kid ourselves — the same path of travel teams, personal coaching and hours of game time that takes some young players into the spotlight of college careers takes others to the orthopedist for overuse injuries or to the psychologist for burnout. And it's not just overuse: Traumatic injuries such as anterior cruciate ligament tears are two to three times more likely to occur in games than practice situations. Single-sport, multi-league participation results in such increased injury exposure. In terms of psychology, it's estimated that about half of kids drop out of organized sports by age 14.

A number of national medical and sporting organizations are trying to improve today's youth sports culture. The American Orthopaedic Sports Society for Sports Medicine, the American Medical Society for Sports Medicine and the American Academy of Pediatrics are promoting healthier behaviors such as encouraging early sports diversification rather than specialization; having time away from sports one to two days a week and two to three months a year; focusing on sportsmanship and game integrity rather than individual achievement; and restricting youths to playing for one team at a time.

Incorporating best practices and research, US Lacrosse has made sweeping recommendations on youth participation. For example, research has found that middle-school athletes do not incorporate peripheral vision cues

well. Data also show that **head injuries** are more frequent and severe when young players cannot anticipate and prepare themselves for contact. Incorporating these concepts, new rules have banned purposeful body checking for U-9, U-11 and U-13 boys, and stick checking for U-9 and U-11 girls. Also, education will be provided on appropriate checking skills, injury prevention techniques and health and safety tips.

US Lacrosse is also studying the use of "fair play" concepts in youth leagues. With these, teams are awarded points for minimizing penalties; all-star selections and playoffs are de-emphasized; and respect for opponents is promoted.

But is the genie out of the bottle? With its rapidly growing popularity, lacrosse is at a crossroads. There is a growing cottage industry set on convincing parents that if their kids are not on the right club or playing at the right showcase, they have no chance of moving up.

Might this result in a higher level of lacrosse skills and performance? Yes, but at what cost? The game needs to cultivate options for children to enjoy their experience without constant pressure to take their game to the next level.

An excellent player who sticks with his middle-of-the-road high school team learns to be a leader, to work with others who might be less talented, to emphasize teamwork over self or maybe even to negotiate with school administration to be more supportive of the lacrosse program. That same special kid might be just another face on an all-star team. It's hard to resist — we all want what we think is best for our kids, and if the Joneses are doing it, we have to keep up. Instead, take some time and talk to your kids about their lacrosse aspirations and to honestly see how they match with yours.

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