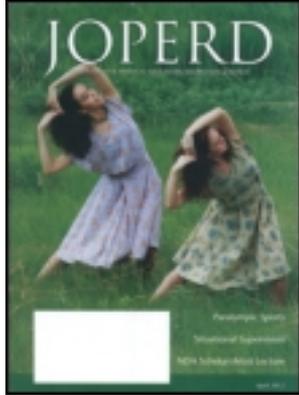


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The "Logic" of Specialization

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THE PROMISES AND PITFALLS OF SPORT SPECIALIZATION IN YOUTH SPORT

The “Logic” of Specialization: Using Children for Adult Purposes

JAY COAKLEY

How and why did year-round specialization in a single sport become common for so many children?



It was not too long ago that the best athlete was the one who played multiple sports and had all-around skills. Lettering in three sports was an admired feat in high schools, and the decathlete who could sprint, jump, run, and endure was the epitome of athletic achievement. But definitions of athletic excellence have changed over the past two generations. An all-around athlete today is often pressured to specialize in one sport, or even in one position. Not to do so might elicit accusations of lacking motivation or having a fear of commitment and success.

Youth programs that encourage year-round specialization in a single sport have become so quickly and thoroughly normalized in United States culture that their historical novelty is often overlooked. How did we get here? Why are we scrambling to find research on the developmental consequences of specialization and its usefulness in producing elite athletes?

Although I am concerned about the consequences of specialization among young people today, I also want to know how and why we have reached this point. Most people know that positive child development requires diverse experiences across a range of situations, so how has year-round specialization in a single sport become common for so many children without evoking serious objections from parents and educators? And how has it become the norm in certain sports and even mandated by some coaches who no doubt know that the overall development of young people would be better served if they participated in multiple physical activities and sports?

After studying youth sports over four decades, I believe that sport specialization has emerged in connection with two changes in the larger society: (1) the privatization and commercialization of youth sports, and (2) the development of unique ideas about parenting, especially the definition of what constitutes a good parent (Coakley, 2009).

Privatization and Commercialization of Youth Sports

During the 1980s President Ronald Reagan and his administration tapped into an emerging cultural belief that *government was the problem, not the solution* to whatever was ailing the United States and the rest of the world. About the same time, Reagan's closest political ally, Margaret Thatcher, prime minister in England, declared that the only way to solve contemporary national and global problems was to assume that *society was a figment of liberal imagination, and that in reality, there were only individuals and their families.*

At the risk of oversimplifying the basis for significant political and cultural changes between then and now, these two ideas—*government is the problem, not the solution* and *there is no society, only individuals and their families*—created a policy framework that has shaped life over the past 30 years. Decisions and policies in both the public and private spheres were based on the ideological assumptions that (1) the sole foundation of social order was personal responsibility, (2) the most effective source of economic growth was unregulated self-interest, and (3) the basis of personal motivation was competition and observable inequalities of income and wealth (Bourdieu, 1998; Harvey, 2005).

At the same time, anyone who supported community-based public programs was labeled a “tax and spend liberal” and marginalized in local, state, and national politics. As a result, funding for park and recreation departments was cut to the bare bones in a matter of a decade, making it difficult or impossible to maintain public youth sport programs. Park and recreation departments were reduced to being brokers of public spaces, including sport fields and venues. Instead of maintaining and managing a full range of youth sports, they issued permits to emerging private programs that were being organized at a rapid pace—much like sport-focused charter schools organized around the ideas of eager parents and entrepreneurs with many of the latter wanting to establish a career in youth sports.

The outcome of these changes was the emergence of various traveling, competitive, club teams and programs. Some of these used public fields and facilities, and others, especially in upper-middle-income areas, built their own. Commercial programs also entered the scene with gymnastics facilities, indoor tennis, indoor soccer, specialized training venues, and other youth sports.

As this occurred, youth sports became a career track and the primary source of income for some adults. Most of these people were well intentioned and committed to a combination of sports and child development. But they also needed youth sports to provide them with year-round income, because they had families to feed, fields to maintain 12 months a year, utility bills to pay, and staff that needed year-round employment.

This meant that dues-paying parents of young people in these programs had to be convinced that year-round memberships and participation were absolutely essential for the future success of their children—for their focus, skills, self-confidence, acceptance into college, college scholarships, careers, and even professional sport contracts.

The ensuing marketing spin that surrounded this *selling of specialization* was in part legitimized by the success of East German and Soviet athletes who were widely thought to have specialized in a particular sport from a very early age. Additionally, there were some opportunistic hustlers who received media attention hyping their highly specialized sport academies; and there were others who founded volleyball, tennis, soccer, and other competitive-tournament-based programs that focused the attention of parents and young

athletes on championships at the community, district, state, regional, and even national levels.

The success of these youth-sport entrepreneurs and the extent to which they influenced private youth sport programs nationwide was amazing. The results were significant and nearly immediate: longer seasons, more demanding practice and competition schedules, year-round participation, extensive travel to scheduled games and a growing array of tournaments, and high rates of early-childhood specialization in sports. Keeping up with the Jones’s kids became a coaching and parental preoccupation.

In this way, youth sports were almost completely transformed in a generation. New foundational philosophies and new goals were established and pursued by coaches, parents, and players. These changes had an immediate impact on the everyday rhythm of family life as well as family relationships, budgets, and expenditures for youth sport participation. There were also significant changes in children’s play patterns and priorities, and a new, exclusive focus on the family rather than the local neighborhood and community as the sponsors of youth sports. In fact, local communities became increasingly irrelevant as teams were composed of young people from wherever their parents were willing to drive to make sure their children trained with the best coaches. The livelihood of these coaches depended on competitive success and year-round participation in their programs. If their young athletes succeeded, it was easier to recruit the next cohort of families and players as dues-paying members of their teams, clubs, and programs.

Of course, the new youth-sport organizers, entrepreneurs, and hustlers did not make changes in youth sports by themselves. Their success depended on cultural timing and compatibility with the larger social context of the United States. That is, their programs had to resonate with parents and with what parents wanted for their children. After all, it was parents who registered children for programs, paid fees, bought uniforms, and gassed up SUVs to drive the family to practices, games, tournaments, and national championships at Disney World.

Development of Unique Ideas About Parenthood

As the emphasis on individualism and personal responsibility became the mantra of the 1980s, ideas about parenthood and what constituted a good parent underwent significant changes. For the first time in any society, parents in the United States were held totally responsible for the whereabouts and actions of their children, 24/7, 365 days a year. Although this exclusive focus on the family and these expectations for parents had always been defined as unrealistic and impractical throughout human history, they were embraced by the majority of people in the United States.

Due to this cultural shift, the moral worth of parents became directly linked to the actions and achievements of their children. If a child succeeded, especially in a highly visible, culturally valued activity, moms and dads could legitimately claim parental moral worth, and others—especially other



Parents often turn out in large numbers even for practices, a reflection of their large personal investment in their children's sport activities.

parents—would likely grant it to them. Most people viewed this as appropriate, but it created a new reality for parents—one that parents in previous generations had not experienced.

The idea that the character and actions of children were shaped exclusively by parents led mothers and fathers to dedicate themselves to the success of their children in ways that few parents had ever done before. Many became obsessive about nurturing the dreams of their children and seeking culturally valued and professionally supervised activities for them. Youth sports were seen as ideal because they were highly valued, visible, and organized to emphasize progressive skill development; in some cases, they were even given media coverage, which parents valued because it added legitimacy to their claims of moral worth.

The high-profile, professionally administered, exclusive, specialized, and usually expensive youth sport programs were identified by many parents as ideal contexts for controlling their children and making sure they were in a visible and culturally valued activity. Finding these activities and sponsoring the involvement of their children enhanced parental moral worth, especially when children were successful and steadily progressed to higher levels of competition.

Parents embraced these programs to meet what became powerful cultural expectations. They expended time, energy, and money to keep their children in sports. Additionally, they dedicated themselves to being chauffeurs, assistant coaches, team moms, purchasing agents, laundresses, uniform and equipment dealers, facility managers, board members, phone-tree participants, emailers, web site managers, and overall supporters of their children's sport dreams.

Some parents developed ambivalent feelings about these roles and expectations and privately questioned the merits of young people playing year round in a single sport. This ambivalence was expressed as they bragged and then complained about the time and energy they devoted to nurturing the sport achievements of their children. They made sure their children were on time for early-morning practices, they left work early to drive to afternoon practices and competitions, they dedicated weekends and vacations to

competitive events, they made payments and put thousands of miles on SUVs as they chased youth sport schedules and tournaments here and there. They paid club fees and fees for private coaching sessions. They stayed in hotels and seldom had unhurried meals while they were on the road. The more they did, the more legitimate were their claims for parental moral worth. To do more than other parents proved their moral superiority. At the same time, they often complained about the impact of these things on their lives.

Despite the ambivalence of some parents, extreme cases of parental sport sponsorship became heralded as the epitome of parental moral worth. For example, when Shawn Johnson's parents put an additional mortgage on their home to continue nurturing Shawn's Olympic gymnastic dreams, NBC commentators identified them as ideal parents. During the 2008 and 2010 Olympic Games in Beijing and Vancouver, media coverage regularly focused on athletes' parents as commentators and journalists praised their dedication and willingness to subordinate their own lives to their child's quest for sport achievements. Even Johnson & Johnson, a major sponsor of NBC Olympic coverage, created a special advertising campaign called "Thanks, Mom" to remind everyone that "Behind every Olympic champion is a... mom [who provides] love and care...to help their children achieve their goals" (for descriptions of the campaign and the families it highlighted, see Johnson & Johnson, 2008). Olympic medals were won by sons and daughters, but they were merit badges of moral worth for parents.

To illustrate the dramatic changes in ideas about parenthood over the past two generations, I often note that when I excelled as a young athlete, my parents were told by others, "You're lucky to have Jay as a son." A generation later, when my son and daughter excelled at tennis and played in the regional mixed doubles finals for the U.S. Open (amateur division), people often declared, "You must be proud of your kids." But when a child excels in a sport today, the parents are asked, "How did you create this athlete?" Being lucky or proud is no longer the issue, because parents are now seen as the architects of a child's success.

This was demonstrated in 1997, when Earl Woods out-earned his son by selling and talking about his book, *Training a Tiger: A Father's Guide to Raising a Winner in Both Golf and Life* (1997). Like other parents of age-group champions, Earl Woods was identified as the *raison d'être* of his son's success, and other parents wanted to know how he did it. In two short generations, parents went from being lucky and proud to being the creators of child athletes.

Of course, the downside of defining parental moral worth in connection with the success of their children is that moms and dads are pushed to and beyond the limits of their resources as they sponsor and manage their children in youth sports. In the process, young people are controlled at the same time as adults cater to their needs within tightly confined spheres of experience, relationships, and identity formation.

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contexts, coaches and parents need to follow evidence-based guidelines for designing practices and to implement those practices with sound standards-based coaching behaviors.

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Young people may enjoy this, at least until mid-adolescence when they seek autonomy and opportunities to develop relationships and identities that require experiences beyond playing a single sport. As noted in some of the articles in this feature, there is little research supporting the idea that the overall physical, psychological, and social development of young people is well served by specializing in a single sport. Adults working in youth sports may experience career benefits from such specialization, and parents may use it in the process of claiming moral worth as moms and dads, but young people are more likely to benefit from participation in multiple sports and physical activities. This is explained in a 2010 position statement from the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (2010) titled, *Guidelines for Participation in Youth Sport Programs: Specialization Versus Multiple-Sport Participation*. Hopefully, these guidelines will encourage critical discussions about early childhood specialization in a single sport.

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