

In an era of specialty sports, a growing consensus encourages well-rounded young athletes



Howard High School's Timmy Jakubek, left, plays baseball and basketball, while his brother, Brian, plays baseball and hockey. Their father, Chris, has encouraged the boys and their older sister, not pictured, to play multiple sports from a young age. (Jen Rynda / Baltimore Sun Media Group)

By **Pete Pichaske**
For Howard Magazine

SHARE THIS

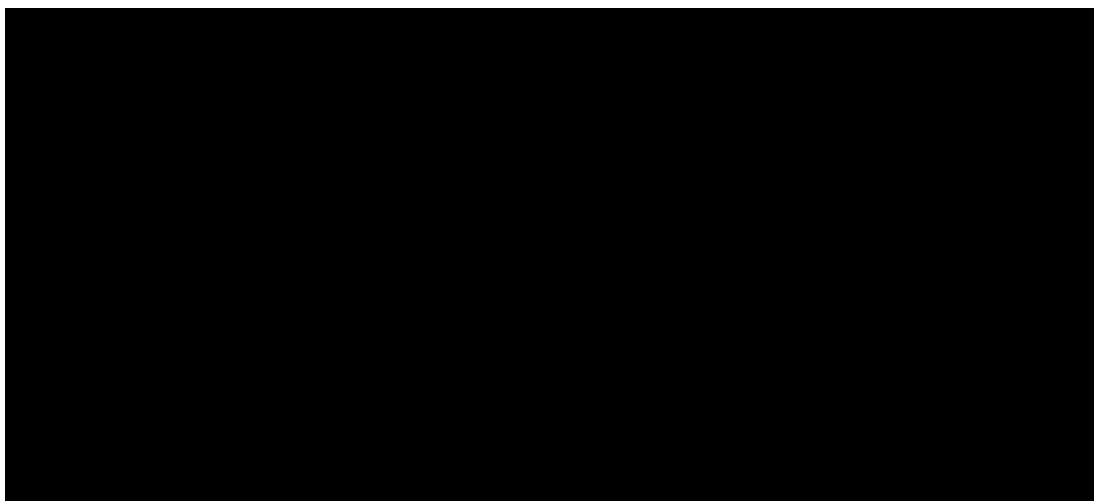


A growing number of parents and professionals agree: children should get a break from a single sport.

JANUARY 4, 2017, 5:12 PM

As the father of three sports-loving children and president of the Elkridge Youth Organization, which operates a wide variety of sports programs, Chris Jakubek knows a thing or two about young people and sports.

One of the things he knows is that it's better for a young person not to play the same sport year-round.



“It’s not good for their physical and mental development,” says Jakubek, who has a daughter in college and two sons at Howard High School. “I could probably name three or four kids off the top of my head whose parents pushed them into one sport, and you know what the kids did? They burned out. They decided not to play that sport in college or pursue it that aggressively in high school.

“We looked for opportunities to put our kids in multiple sports. ... We wanted them to go out and enjoy sports, and it worked out overwhelmingly well for them.”

Jakubek might not be in step with the latest trend in youth sports, where many are played year-round and parents are convinced that specializing in a single sport is the best way to assure their child grows into a top-flight athlete.

But his views are supported by growing numbers of sports physiologists, pediatricians, psychologists — even coaches and professional athletes — who argue that young people who specialize in one sport before high school are more likely to get injured, stressed out or burned out than those who play multiple sports.

Moreover, they say, those kids might not become as good at their sport as their peers with more diverse experience.

“There’s a fairly unanimous consensus now that sport specialization, especially early, really does the opposite of what you would hope,” says Dr. Daniel M. Zimet, a certified sports psychologist in Columbia. “Having multiple sport exposure makes kids more likely to continue playing and less likely to get injured. And it ends up making them better athletes.”

Such sentiments are backed by a growing body of research. A study published in the September 2014 *Journal of Clinical Sport Psychology*, for example, found that only one quarter of the minor league professional baseball

players surveyed specialized in the sport before the age of 12, and the mean age of specialization was 15. Those who waited to specialize, the survey also found, were more likely to get college scholarships.

In recent years, the benefits for children who play more than one sport have been extolled by prominent figures from the president of the American Medical Society for Sports Medicine to Orioles icon Cal Ripken, Jr.

David R. McDuff, an Ellicott City sports psychiatrist who has worked with athletes from middle school to the pros, says almost all professional football and baseball players participated in more than one sport through high school.

Moreover, he says, even as pros they take a break from their one sport, typically not playing during the off-season.

“The body needs periodic breaks, and one way to do that is to shift from one sport to another,” says McDuff, who was team psychiatrist for the Baltimore Ravens for years and still serves as a team psychiatrist for the Orioles.

Breaks are even more important for children, he said, because playing the same sport involves the same muscles and movements, which can lead to “overuse injuries.” Playing a variety of sports, on the other hand, develops a wider variety of muscles and physical skills — and adds a jolt of excitement and fun that can keep a person playing sports into adulthood.

Poster family for multiple sports

No pediatrician or sports psychologist had to tell Tre’Von Hopkins the advantages of playing more than one sport.

He started playing organized football and basketball at age 7 and was a three-sport standout at Oakland Mills High School, where he added track to his athletic pursuits. He was named offensive football player of the year by the Howard County Times in 2016, started for the school’s championship basketball team for three years and won a state title in the high jump.

Now 18, he is a freshman on a full football scholarship at the State University of New York at Albany, a Division I college in upstate New York.

Hopkins said he was never tempted to specialize in just one sport before college; he was having too much fun playing two or three.

“When football season ended, I couldn’t wait for basketball season,” he says.

He also is convinced his multi-sports youth made him a better athlete.

“You use different skills,” he says. “With football, I use my strength. Basketball, I had to be a little bit more shifty. ... With track, I focused on leg power and strength, and it got me flexible because I stretched a lot.”

Many of the skills he learned in one sport, he says, helped him excel in others.

Hopkins' family could be a poster family for sports diversity: All five children — along with Tre'Von; Evan, 24; A.J., 22; Jordan, 17; and Aliyah, 10 — play or played at least two sports. Aliyah is active in four: basketball, soccer, gymnastics and dance.

Their mother, Toni Hopkins, says they got their love of multiple sports from her husband, Andre, who played three sports at Hammond High School, where the couple met.

“He steered them into playing multi-sports, but he didn't make them,” she says. “They just enjoyed it.”

She's glad they did. Playing a variety of sports, Toni said, exposed them to a variety of coaches and teammates, taught them a wider variety of skills, built their confidence and got them ready for the next sport season.

“Maybe it doesn't work for everybody,” she says. “But with our kids it did.”

‘It's the world we're in’

Despite the growing body of research, the expert opinions and the testimonials from families, the current era of sports specialization among youngsters — fueled by parents eager to shape their children into the best athletes possible and by the explosion of club teams in so many sports — is unlikely to go away soon.

“We're in a transitional period,” says Zimet, the Columbia sports psychologist. “The knowledge of what's best for kids is available and being expressed, but it hasn't made its way into the hearts and minds of coaches and parents.”

“It's the world we're in,” Charles Dennison, president of the Howard County Youth Program, says of the emphasis on and availability of year-round sports.

His own program, Dennison says, bucks the trend somewhat; for example, it only allows games, no practices, during the off-season of its basketball program. “But that's rare,” he says. “Most programs, you go all-out, you play all year.”

He adds: “I don't think it's a good thing, and I think 90 percent of physiologists and sports medicine people will say that same thing. But it's embedded in our society now.”

Copyright © 2017, Howard County Times, a Baltimore Sun Media Group publication | Place an Ad

Tips for parents

Dr. David R. McDuff, an Ellicott City sports psychiatrist who has worked with athletes from middle-schoolers to professionals, believes firmly in regular breaks from one sport, especially for children. Among his recommendations:

Explore options. In elementary school, children should be encouraged to explore a number of different sports and other activities to see what they enjoy.

Take breaks. By middle school, they can choose one specialty sport but should take periodic respites — two-week breaks at least three or four times a year — to play another sport or focus on a non-sport.

Know when to back off. If an older child is specializing in a sport he or she enjoys but struggling physically or mentally (the child of one of McDuff's clients was vomiting before every swim meet, for example), have the child drop back to a less competitive level.

This article is related to: [Medical Research](#), [Baltimore Orioles](#)