

Specializing in 1 sport can be risky for young athletes, experts say



With the [fall sports season](#) well under way, young athletes may face pressures from coaches and looming college scholarships to train in only one sport year-round.

But experts have issued a new warning to parents and coaches that focusing only on one sport at an early age [comes with risks](#).

"Specialization at an early age is not really necessary to play at that elite level," Eric Post, manager of the Sports Medicine Research Laboratory for the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Committee, said Thursday at a briefing hosted by the National Athletic Trainer's Association. "It actually is...associated with worse outcomes in terms of injury and burnout from sport."

Sports specialization is the act of participating in or training for a single sport year-round.

Young athletes often think that specializing will help them avoid injury and improve their skills in order to perform that one sport at an elite level, but that's not the case, experts say.

"I see pretty often, especially in the rowing world, that parents want to get a competitive edge with their kids getting college scholarships," Sophia Vitas, a rower on the U.S. National Women's Rowing Team, said at Thursday's briefing.

Vita said she knows of many athletes who started rowing young and were recruited by colleges for teams, but didn't have successful college careers. On the other hand, she said many of her fellow national team rowers were not recruited and were walk-ons to their college teams.

Vitas, set to represent Team USA in the Paris Olympics next year, started rowing at a later age herself, just before she turned 22. She credits experiencing different sports and deciding what she liked and didn't like in athletics with contributing to her success in rowing today.



In this Sept. 19, 2022, file photo, Kristina Wagner and Sophia Vitas compete in Womens Double Sc...
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Participating in a variety of sports at a young age may help build a good base of athleticism that can prevent injury, which in turn can decrease burnout, according to the panel of experts.

Athletes who play multiple sports collect different types of movement skills that they can use in future athletic endeavors, according to Dr. Michele Labotz, medical director of the University of New England Athletic Training Program.

Research studies [published in the Orthopaedic Journal of Sports Medicine](#) have found that athletes who play multiple sports may have some movement advantages over athletes who just stick to one sport.

"What was interesting is when you looked at the highest of the high

specialized athletes, their balance was almost the same as those that didn't play sports," said Dr. Gregory Walker, sports medicine doctor at the Children's Hospital of Colorado Sports Medicine Center. "Whereas the ones that were moderately or low specialized, they actually had balance better than both groups."

Walker also noted that elite pro athletes like Tom Brady and Roger Federer started out playing sports other than football and tennis.

But coaches and parents don't hear this advice enough, according to the panel.

Post said parents and young athletes more often hear the message that they need to focus on one sport very young in order to be successful. He urges parents, coaches, and athletes to define success differently.

"We can define success in sport in all different ways, from participating at the highest levels to being physically active when you're 85 years old," he said. "There's a lot of variety of paths in how you can be successful as an athlete."

According to NATA, there are a few important things to keep in mind for young athletes to stay healthy.

First, kids should delay playing only a single sport year-round as long as possible and should instead sample a variety of sports. This supports general physical fitness and reduces the risk of injury.

To further reduce risk of injury, young athletes should participate in one organized sport per season and not play a single sport more than eight months in a year.

Young athletes should have a minimum of two days off per week for rest and recovery and spend time away from an organized sport at the end of each competitive season, the experts said. This promotes physical and mental recovery and minimizes the risk of injury and burnout or dropout.

A good rule of thumb for young athletes is to not participate in organized sports more hours per week than their age, the experts said.

And the panel reminds parents and coaches that athletics is still about fun for young athletes.

"Keep it fun or else they're not going to do it," Labotz said.

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