

The Problem with Playing Sports Year Round

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The majority of young athletes play sports year round. Once one sport finishes, the next one starts. According to the Lucile Packard Children's Hospital at Stanford University, more than 30 million children in the United States participate in sports every year. Of those, more than 3.5 million injuries are reported each year. When kids should be focused on generalized training activities such as learning how to run, working on balance, and improving strength and speed, they are instead specializing in multiple sports year round and often times practicing 6 days/week. And, we wonder why approximately 70% of kids drop out of sports by the age of 14 and there are more acute and chronic sports injuries than ever before?

Our model for developing youth athletes in this country is backwards. Kids routinely play games and practice 6 days/week with little or no time off on a yearly basis. The end result? More injuries, more kids dropping out of sports and more decrements in performance. We are at a crossroad where coaches, parents and athletes need to understand that more is not better. I just returned from a conference in Boston this past weekend and one of the speakers made a very interesting point which influenced my decision to write this article for the May newsletter. He stated, "My 9 year old daughter plays more hockey games in her season than the Boston University men's hockey team. I thought to myself, why is an underdeveloped 9 year old team playing more games than a physically developed college team? It makes no sense. That's like putting go-cart tires on your car and saying I'm going to drive to Florida! It won't happen, the car will break down!

The key to helping young athletes develop properly requires a multi-faceted approach with a **balanced schedule** on a yearly basis. That means, adequate time should be implemented for sport practices and adequate time should be implemented for a proper conditioning program. In addition, adequate rest time should be given to the athlete on a yearly basis. Below is a recommended schedule for optimal athletic development.

Age	6 - 8	9 - 12	13 -18	19 & up
Maximum # of Sports Played Per Year	2	3	2	2
Days of Skill Training / Week (sport practice)	2 to 3	3 to 4	3 to 4	4 to 5
Days of Conditioning / Week (speed/strength develop.)	0	1 to 3	2 to 5	3 to 6
Time away from playing competitive sports each year	1 month	1.5 months	2 months	3 months

The 3 star sport is a thing of the past. To excel, kids should narrow their focus as they progress in age. By high school, 2 sports plus proper training is key. Two sports played in separate seasons with a distinct off-season is critical. If athlete's between 13 and 18

continue to play 3 sports, attend every single sport camp in the summer and continue with this unbalanced schedule, the end result is they spread themselves thin and they become average players and their performance is mediocre in all 3. Then once they finally decide to play 1 or 2 sports, it's too late to adequately develop to be good enough in those chosen sports. The probability of kids not doing well playing sports year round is very HIGH. On the flip side, when young kids specialize too soon, we are preparing them for burnout in their teenage years. It is staggering to know that 70% of kids burnout of sport by the age of 14, this is why I believe our model for development in this country needs to change. Let's take hockey as an example. In Europe, they play 40 game seasons and the rest of the time, they are conditioning their body to be better athletes. In the U.S, we play 60-80 game seasons and the rest of the time, we are playing another sport and there is minimal training being done. The end result? Of the top scorers in the NHL during the 2007-2008 season, 6 Europeans, 5 Canadians and 2 U.S Collegiate players. Zero Americans. Our system needs to change.