

Nearly half of today's high school athletes specialize in one sport

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Youth single sport specialization—training and playing just one sport, often year round and on multiple teams—is a growing phenomenon in the U.S. A new study presented today at the 2017 Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons (AAOS), found that 45 percent of high school athletes specialize in just one sport, two years earlier than current collegiate and professional athletes say they did.

The new study—which involved surveys of 503 [high school](#), 856 collegiate and 1,731 [professional athletes](#) (3,090 athletes, total)—also found that high [school athletes](#) reported a statistically higher incidence of sport-related, musculoskeletal injuries than college and professional athletes.

In addition, "the professional athletes polled in our study were statistically less likely to promote or encourage early sports specialization," said study author Michael G. Ciccotti, MD, chief of sports medicine at the Rothman Institute in Philadelphia, and professor of orthopaedic surgery and director of the Sports Medicine Fellowship at Thomas Jefferson University. Only 22 percent of professional athletes said they want their own child to specialize in a single sport during childhood or adolescence, and only 62 percent believe early sports specialization aids in performance.

Among the other study highlights:

- 45.2 percent of high school athletes, 67.7 percent of collegiate

athletes and 46.0 percent of professional athletes specialized to play a single sport during their childhood and adolescence. Single sports specialization occurred at an average of 12.7 ± 2.4 years, 14.8 ± 2.5 and 14.7 ± 2.4 years, respectively.

- Current high school, college and professional athletes spent a comparable number of [months](#) each year training to play a single sport: 8.5 months ± 3.4 months (high school athletes), 10.0 ± 2.6 (collegiate) and 8.8 ± 3.3 months (professional athletes); and playing in games and tournaments, 6.1 months ± 3.3 months, 7.2 ± 3.2 , and 7.8 ± 2.5 , respectively.
- Only 61.7 percent of professional athletes said they think specializing in one sport helps an athlete to play at a higher level versus 79.7 percent of high school athletes and 80.6 percent of collegiate athletes.

"This data challenges the notion that success at an elite level requires athletes to specialize in one sport at a very young age," said Dr. Ciccotti. "And while the link between early specialization and injury has yet to be clearly defined, our data may have important implications with respect to injury prevention in youth athletes."

More information: Study abstract: newsroom.aaos.org/images/9064/ionAbstract21417.pdf

Provided by American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons

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