

Pandemic had many young athletes reconsidering their sport

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(HealthDay)—The pause in youth sports caused by the COVID-19

pandemic wound up shaking some budding athletes to their core, a new U.S. survey shows.

More than 1 in 10 youth athletes ended up reconsidering their sports goals or aspirations as the pandemic closed stadiums and gyms. That included one-quarter of athletes in their later teens, researchers found.

Some felt that the pandemic cost them too many opportunities on the playing field, while others enjoyed the break from training so much they were reluctant to dive back in, said lead researcher Dr. Henry Ellis, a pediatric orthopedic surgeon and associate director of clinical research with Scottish Rite for Children Center for Excellence in Sports Medicine in Dallas.

"You had a large chunk of kids who said, 'Boy, training hard's not for me,'" Ellis said. "I don't need to necessarily train 10 hours a week. Relaxing is nice, too."

About 1 in 4 youth athletes also struggled with depression during the pandemic, particularly if they specialized and trained hard for one sport, Ellis added.

Overall, the results indicate that parents and coaches might be pushing [young athletes](#) too hard, Ellis said.

"A very small percentage of kids end up becoming [elite athletes](#)," Ellis said. "We need to quit assuming that any kid less than the age of 14 has the ability to be that one in a million elite [athlete](#), and we need to foster sports to be fun."

For this survey, Ellis and his colleagues surveyed 575 child and teenage athletes across the United States, asking how the pandemic had affected their sports.

More than 4 of 5 survey participants were considered high-level athletes, competing at a higher level than recreational or school sports. About 3 in 5 said they specialized in a single sport.

Not all the results were negative. About 86% continued to train while social distancing, with 40% participating in virtual training, results showed. Average sleep duration increased by about 1.3 hours a night, and sleep quality improved in nearly a third of athletes.

"Most athletes coped quite well," Ellis said. "They were able to adapt with virtual training and kept in regular contact with their teams."

But for some high-level athletes, the pandemic pause caused their enthusiasm to crater and allowed feelings of depression to take root, researchers found.

About 19% of late-teen athletes reported feeling moderate depression, and 4% severe depression, as a result of the pandemic, results show.

Depression was most common in athletes focusing on a single sport, Ellis said.

"If you play one sport, having higher depression scores is of note to us because we start to wonder if those who play multiple sports are better able to adapt to different environments," Ellis said. "If you focus on one sport at a young age and then it gets taken away from you, maybe you don't cope with it quite as well."

Lost opportunities

Researchers also learned that 13% of youth athletes had changed their sports-related goals during the pandemic, including 24% of late-teen athletes.

"Many of these may be high school students who lost the opportunity for exposure for a collegiate scholarship, or maybe to get recruited by a college," Ellis said. "They had their season canceled, or they couldn't finish out their season."

In addition, about 40% said they simply lost interest in training for competition—an indication that concerns are well-founded about burning out youth athletes with over-scheduled weekends and high competitive stress, Ellis said.

"When you get removed from sports for six to eight weeks, you start to realize there's a world that doesn't have that stress associated with it, and there are opportunities for [free play](#) and to do what you want to do as opposed to always scheduled hardcore training or competition," Ellis said.

Dr. Matthew Matava, chief of sports medicine at Washington University in St. Louis, said "these findings are not surprising given the significance of amateur sports in our society and the emphasis placed on sports as a source of identity in children and adolescents in the U.S."

Youth athletes also might have lost their enthusiasm because they weren't able to pal around with friends or because they weren't able to be part of a charge for a championship, Matava added.

Encourage fun

The survey shows that parents and coaches need to take a step back and encourage fun on the court or playing field, Ellis said.

"The parents need to realize that this is for fun," Ellis said. "I believe there's a lot of misconceptions that kids need to train hard or play more. The reality is that we just want them to develop and be physically and

mentally healthy, which means getting exposure at a recreational level."

Matava agreed.

"Parents can help by de-emphasizing single sport specialization [especially in younger kids], encourage continued general fitness and social interaction within the restrictions imposed by COVID-19, help their kids explore new interests and hobbies outside of their usual sports activities, and encourage their kids to openly discuss any change in mood or behavior consistent with an alteration in their mental well-being," Matava said.

The new study was to be presented virtually Tuesday at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons. Findings presented at medical meetings are considered preliminary until published in a peer-reviewed journal.

More information: The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has more about [COVID-19 and kids](#).

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