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One-Sport Athletes

By CWK Network Producer

"I think, parents, part of your job is to just be smarter than your kids. And to keep them motivated in, I think, different directions."

-- George Williams, psychologist

Webb Worthington, 18, has a room filled with trophies and medals from many different sports. "Soccer, basketball, football, baseball ... diving, and a little bit of swimming," he says.

But it seems a diverse trophy collection like his is becoming rare. More and more young athletes are feeling the pressure to specialize in one sport year round.

"Sometimes the parents' wants are what gets intermingled in there. So parents will want their kid to be a star in a given area versus just let them play," says George Williams, psychologist.

But being a star can be short-lived. Only 1 percent of high school athletes get a college scholarship, and a tiny fraction of those go pro.

Experts say there are two possible outcomes when a child specializes in just one sport. "That could either drive that child to not like that sport anymore or to only consider that sport," says college track coach Andria King.

Forget about art, music, student government, the chess club, and the honor roll. That's the danger, she says, when kids are obsessed by a single sport. Instead, experts say, parent should help their kids see the value of being well rounded.

Webb plays several sports but has only one goal. "Perform to the best of my ability," he says, "same with diving, baseball, same in school, I mean anything I do. But not to the point where I want to give up everything else in my life."

By Amye Walters
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The Pressure to Commit

It seems kids with a single-sport focus are replacing the three-sport athletes of yesteryear. Some might say the conventional wisdom of exposing youth to many facets of recreation is an archaic mentality. Although statistics have not been tracked, many grade-school coaches lament the growing phenomenon of pressuring kids to specialize in one sport.

One high school coach, Dick Myers says, "AAU (Amateur Athletic Union) coaches have pushed out guidance counselors and high school coaches as they try to barter deals with colleges." Much of the pressure comes from the coaches, who are often specializing themselves. Bob Landers, a 30-year veteran of high-school athletics says, "As coaches started doing just one sport, they lost perspective and wanted to have their players working on their sport all the time."

Consider the following:

- Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) coaches with connections to shoe companies scout fifth- and sixth-graders playing recreation league basketball.
- Some private schools scout recreation centers and use sneakers and scholarship promises to entice the best players.
- Some coaches feel superstar players will enhance one's reputation once (and if) they obtain a scholarship to a prestigious, sports-oriented college.

What Parents Need to Know

Psychiatrists have given a name to the condition where a person obsesses over a child's achievement: the "Achievement by Proxy" or "Munchausen by proxy" syndrome. Traditionally, MBPS occurred when a caretaker would convince another person

that he/she (the other person) was ill. The caretaker reveled in the attention coming from doctors, nurses and others. Basically, MBPS uses someone else as the attention-getting object, the proxy. MBPS has found its way into sports, however. In relation to sports, MBPS takes place when the parent or coach revels in the player's attention from fans, teammates, scouts, etc., and in the won games, trophies and awards the player achieves. In addition:

- Some say MBPS is a cry for help from parents who may be experiencing anxiety or depression or have feelings of inadequacy as parents of young children.
- These individuals are looking for confirmation of their parenting skills, or in the case of a coach, coaching skills.
- Abuse of exceptional and high-achieving children as part of parental achievement by proxy can be seen in such varied areas as sport, examination achievement, musical virtuosity, film performance and beauty contests.

For most, dreams of million-dollar contracts and Olympic gold medals will never materialize. However, if a child discovers on his or her own some extraordinary skill in one sport and then decides to dedicate himself or herself to reaching an elite level, that's okay, as long as it's his/her decision. And always remember, that regardless of the level of excellence, participation in sports – one, two, even three at a time – will nurture skills, foster friendships, provide lifetime lessons and create indelible memories.

Team sports provide physical benefits, like improved fitness, coordination, weight control and a reduced risk of health problems. Among the life skills a child can gain are: accepting feedback, commitment, discipline, fairness, following directions, interacting with others, respect, responsibility and taking turns. Keep in mind:

- Children often follow a parent's or coach's dream, not their own.
- Eighty percent of parents said they saw injuries to their children as "part of the game."
- Some children might consider themselves an underachiever if they don't make the city All-Star or "traveling" team and are "only" good enough to make a school squad.
- Some young players refuse to participate on their high school teams because they feel club teams are more competitive and club coaches have better contacts with college recruiters.
- Young players may never discover talent in another sport after devotion to one sport at an early age.

As a parent of a youth athlete, you should:

- Always be positive and encouraging.
- Emphasize effort and improvement over winning or personal performance.
- Attend events and practices as your schedule allows.
- Model good sportsmanship.
- Above all, keep your child's sport in perspective.

Resources

- [The British Journal of Psychiatry](#)
- [Kids Health](#)
- [Mayo Clinic](#)
- [One Hand Clapping](#)
- [USA Today](#)

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