

Multiple Choice Answer

A longtime high school explains why encouraging multi-sport participation is in the best interest of your athletes--and your team.

By Jim Fornaciari

Jim Fornaciari recently retired as Head Baseball Coach at Glenbard West High School in Glen Ellyn, Ill., a suburb of Chicago, where he continues to serve as a history teacher. His teams went to the state finals in 2002 and 2003 and his program produced a number of college and professional players.

Every region of the country is proud of its homegrown athletes who go on to make a name for themselves at the collegiate or professional level. Here in the Chicago area, two athletes I especially enjoyed watching develop were Cliff Floyd and Antwaan Randle El.

Granted, I wasn't thrilled to see Floyd come to the plate against my team with the bases loaded, and I'm sure area football coaches were stymied when trying to stop Randle El from scoring another touchdown. But we all developed great respect for them as athletes and competitors.

Floyd and Randle El come to mind because they are part of a quickly disappearing era—that of the multi-sport athlete. Floyd was an all-state basketball and baseball player before moving on to professional baseball. Randle El starred in three sports in high school and continued to compete in all three in college before playing in the NFL.

Both of these athletes came through high school when kids were encouraged to play two or three sports. That emphasis on diversifying one's talents seems to be all but gone now, and in my mind, that is a negative. I believe we are doing a disservice to today's young people by steering them toward sport specialization. And I also believe that as coaches, we should play a prominent role in bringing back the multi-sport competitor.

Better Athletes?

There is little doubt that modern training and weightlifting programs have helped produce stronger athletes. There is also no question that earning a starting spot on a high school sports team is more competitive than in years past. So it would seem to make sense for an athlete to spend his or her primary sport's off-season lifting weights and concentrating on sport-specific skill development.

But doing so comes at a price. The benefits of competing in different sports—with different coaches and different teammates—are many. When added up, they trump the pluses of an athlete spending all his or her time focusing on one sport alone.

One major positive of going multi-sport is that the athlete will become a stronger competitor. Take, for example, a pitcher in a late-inning bases-loaded scenario. If he faced the same type of pressure situation a few months earlier on the basketball court, he can use that recent competitive experience to mentally overcome it. Although that pitcher did not work throughout the winter with a private pitching instructor, the confidence he gained by participating on a competitive basketball team will pay far greater dividends.

Becoming a stronger competitor also entails taking risks and learning to fail, which doesn't happen much in a weightroom, says Steve Stanicek, a former Major League Baseball player and current Head Baseball Coach and Assistant Football Coach at Lockport (Ill.) High School. "I do not see enough kids dealing with failure very well," he says. "Even more importantly, I don't see them taking the risk to give 100 percent every time—even though it might result in failure.

“They feel better in a safe environment like a pitching lesson, rather than getting on a wrestling mat and taking the chance they might get their tail kicked,” Stanicek continues. “The good thing about getting their tail kicked is they have to try to figure out how to not let it happen again. If they are competing in only one season a year, it’s tough to learn how to do that.”

Our student-athletes can also receive important team building lessons through playing other sports. A few years ago, my top pitcher found a way to help make everyone on the team feel valuable. The previous fall, he had completed his senior football season as a little-used backup quarterback. Despite seeing limited playing time, he still felt valued by the football team’s leaders.

When the baseball season started, he brought this experience to our team. He understood that even though he was going to be one of our key players, he needed to appreciate every member of the team. That, of course, bolstered team camaraderie in a huge way.

Even negative experiences can help an athlete in his or her next sport. If our basketball team struggles through a difficult losing season, the lessons learned about perseverance and holding one’s head high can be used in whatever sport is waiting for those athletes that spring.

Another benefit is increased athleticism, which is what you want when your outfielder needs to make a leaping catch or when your volleyball player needs to save a ball rebounding off the net. “Learning how to move your body the way your brain is telling it to when you have to make adjustments on the fly is crucial to being a great athlete,” says Stanicek. “Today’s kids are bigger and stronger and faster than in the past, but they have a hard time moving their bodies in subtle ways.”

Scott Lawler, Assistant Baseball Coach at the University of Notre Dame, sees this as he recruits players for the Fighting Irish. “Multiple-sport athletes train different muscles in their body and seem to be more athletic than athletes who play only one sport,” he says. “One-sport players have trained their body to do sport-specific movements, but so many movements cross over in an actual athletic contest.”

Single-sport athletes also risk developing an injury through overtraining. The American Academy of Pediatrics Council on Sports Medicine and Fitness recommends two to three months off per year from any one sport. And most professional baseball players shut their arms down for at least four months during the off-season. So it’s difficult to understand why some high school baseball players are encouraged to throw on a year-round basis.

One more nod for the multi-sport athlete can be seen in attitude. As a baseball coach, I always looked forward to the arrival of winter sport athletes to our early season practices. My experience was that boys coming off a long basketball season or a tough wrestling campaign were often much more excited to start baseball practice compared to boys that put in monotonous hours in a batting cage all winter. The kids who played a different sport in the winter seemed energized by a change in their athletic routine.

Developmental Benefits

Athleticism, competitive drive, teamwork, and enthusiasm are all things coaches want to see in athletes. But there are additional benefits for the multi-sport competitor as an individual.

The first is that it allows a young person the flexibility to follow more than one interest. In high school, it wasn’t clear whether Randle El was best at football, baseball, or basketball. He was encouraged to compete in all three sports until he could figure out where his passion lay. And what if Jim Brown were in high school today. The NFL legend won a total of 13 letters in four different sports, even setting a Long Island basketball scoring record (that was eventually broken by future baseball Hall of Famer Carl Yastrzemski). But now, he would likely be pushed into choosing one sport over the rest and football or lacrosse may have missed one of its greatest players ever.

Playing several sports also teaches a young person how to use their talents in more than one way. In our changing workforce, most employers want to hire individuals who can adapt to changes and develop new skills with ease. The experience of shifting gears to a different sport each season is great preparation for the working world.

For example, the backup quarterback/star pitcher I mentioned earlier learned the lesson of appreciating everyone's value during the football season. What a great life lesson he could then bring to so many situations! Had he played fall baseball and missed the limited snaps he received on the football field, he would have missed an opportunity to grow as an individual.

Finally, let's think about what we really want kids to get out of sports. In most cases, we want them to have positive educational experiences that help them mature. By playing different sports for different coaches, they will have a vast array of experiences and thus more opportunities to learn and grow. They will also meet more people, which can open new doors. Adding variety to a student's experience helps them to emerge as balanced young adults.

Culture Shift for Coaches

There are many factors that have played a role in the disappearance of the multi-sport athlete, which is why there is not just one solution. Overall, it will take a change in the attitudes of a lot of people. And it starts with us as coaches.

One of the main reasons for sport specialization is the influence of coaches who believe winning comes through a year-round commitment. Can we change our tune? Can we tell our athletes that off-season training is optional and playing another sport is encouraged? And can we show them we sincerely mean it?

One way to do this is for coaches to work more collaboratively. As a head coach, consider being an assistant coach in another sport and asking head coaches in other sports to serve as your assistants. Multi-sport coaches are in a great position to help foster the right culture and attract more students to play more sports.

It can also be helpful to discuss this topic as coaches. Formal and informal meetings are a good place to discuss the benefits of multi-sport participation and build bridges between coaches of different sports. Newly hired coaches may need to be educated on the importance of encouraging multi-sport participation. We can turn to our athletic directors to help us with meetings on this topic.

We also each need to do as we say, since it can be easy to send mixed messages to athletes. For example, a basketball coach who publicly talks about the benefits of playing a spring sport but coaches a club team during the spring sends a confusing message.

Coaches should also consider special recognition for multi-sport athletes. Some schools give out patches or awards to student-athletes who play several sports during the school year.

Educating Parents

Parents are often the main culprits behind sport specialization, so it's important to educate them about the benefits of multi-sport participation. We can take time during preseason parents' meetings to broach the topic and then continue communicating the message throughout the year.

Along with explaining all the physical benefits, talking about scholarships will often get a parent's attention. Many parents think the path to a college athletic scholarship is through specialization. But more and more college coaches are looking for multi-sport athletes. "I often rank kids who play more than one sport at a higher level on my recruiting list because I know they stay competitive all year long," Lawler says.

Some college coaches are also concerned that a young person who has been specializing for several seasons has already reached his or her ceiling. While the athlete who played multiple sports might be raw in some areas, college coaches can foresee tremendous growth once that athlete gets their coaching at the next level.

You can also emphasize the importance of multi-sport participation to parents through any communication you put out. As head baseball coach, I produced newsletters three times a year to keep parents and community members informed about important team news. With each issue, I was sure to provide a list of the multiple sport players involved in my program, along with their accomplishments in their other sports.

Athletes on Board

Of course, we must also get the message across to our athletes. I found it worked well to simply talk a lot about multi-sport participation. For example, in practice I would reference examples of mental toughness or physical preparation in a sport other than the one I was coaching. From time to time, I gave my players brief reading assignments that focused on being competitive, and many of the stories highlighted contemporary athletes who made a multi-sport commitment in high school.

Along with a lot of communication, coaches need to walk the walk. For example, we can attend games of our athletes in other sports, which shows everyone we really do encourage our players to be on other teams. And your athletes will appreciate the fact that you made an effort to support them.

Transition times—when one sport season is coming to an end and a new one is beginning—present more opportunities to show your belief in multi-sport participation. I observed a veteran girls' softball coach make a great statement last spring by canceling an indoor batting practice in favor of having her squad watch a basketball tournament game. Her message of support for a multi-sport culture was clear.

As a head coach, I learned that in order to get the most out of my multiple-sport athletes I needed to give them time to recharge their batteries prior to starting our practices—whether they wanted it or not. They may be eager to start your sport, but giving them a few days off to rest and get caught up in other aspects of their lives often times pays great dividends.

If we really want to encourage multi-sport athletes, coaches should recognize and appreciate the difficulty of such a task and be flexible at the outset of the season. In most cases, they are your best athletes and will quickly catch up to the rest of the team.

One last example I learned from a rival coach. During the fall and spring sports seasons, this basketball coach clipped local newspaper articles about his players competing in other sports. He then sent the articles along with a positive note to his players highlighted in them. Although this communication was not done on a public level, it sent a very powerful message to the athletes.

There is certainly value in working with private instructors during an off-season. There is also benefit that can be found by working in the weightroom. However, encouraging these activities at the expense of the benefits that come from playing an actual sport is not in the best interests of young people that rely on our coaching and teaching. Let the kids play!