The “Logic” of Specialization: Using Children for Adult Purposes

It was not too long ago that the best athlete was the one who played multiple sports and had all-around skills. Lettering in three sports was an admired feat in high schools, and the decathlete who could sprint, jump, run, and endure was the epitome of athletic achievement. But definitions of athletic excellence have changed over the past two generations. An all-around athlete today is often pressured to specialize in one sport, or even in one position. Not to do so might elicit accusations of lacking motivation or having a fear of commitment and success.

Youth programs that encourage year-round specialization in a single sport have become so quickly and thoroughly normalized in United States culture that their historical novelty is often overlooked. How did we get here? Why are we scrambling to find research on the developmental consequences of specialization and its usefulness in producing elite athletes?
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THE LOGIC OF Specialization

By Jay Coackley

Although I am concerned about the consequences of specialization among young people today, I also want to know how and why we have reached this point. Most people know that positive child development requires diverse experiences across a range of situations, so how has year-round specialization in a single sport become common for so many children without evoking serious objections from parents and educators? And how has it become the norm in certain sports and even mandated by some coaches who no doubt know that the overall development of young people would be better served if they participated in multiple physical activities and sports?

After studying youth sports over four decades, I believe that sport specialization has emerged in connection with two changes in the larger society:
1. The privatization and commercialization of youth sports, and
2. The development of unique ideas about parenting, especially the definition of what constitutes a good parent (Coakley, 2009).

Privatization and Commercialization of Youth Sports

During the 1980s President Ronald Reagan and his administration tapped into an emerging cultural belief that government was the problem, not the solution to whatever was ailing the United States and the rest of the world. About the same time, Reagan’s closest political ally, Margaret Thatcher, prime minister in England, declared that the only way to solve contemporary national and global problems was to assume that society was a figment of liberal imagination, and that in reality, there were only individuals and their families.

At the risk of oversimplifying the basis for significant political and cultural changes between then and now, these two ideas--government is the problem, not the solution and there is no society, only individuals and their families--created a policy framework that has shaped life over the past 30 years. Decisions and policies in both the public and private spheres were based on the ideological assumptions that (1) the sole foundation of social order was personal responsibility, (2) the most effective source of economic growth was unregulated self-interest, and (3) the basis of personal motivation was competition and observable inequalities of income and wealth (Bourdieu, 1998; Harvey, 2005).

At the same time, anyone who supported community-based public programs was labeled a “tax and spend liberal” and marginalized in local, state, and national politics. As a result, funding for park and recreation departments was cut to the bare bones in a matter of a decade, making it difficult or impossible to maintain public youth sport programs. Park and recreation departments were reduced to being brokers of public spaces, including sport fields and venues. Instead of maintaining and managing a full range of youth sports, they issued
The Logic of Specialization  (Continued)

permits to emerging private programs that were being organized at a rapid pace—much like sport-focused charter schools organized around the ideas of eager parents and entrepreneurs with many of the latter wanting to establish a career in youth sports.

The outcome of these changes was the emergence of various traveling, competitive, club teams and programs. Some of these used public fields and facilities, and others, especially in upper-middle-income areas, built their own. Commercial programs also entered the scene with gymnastics facilities, indoor tennis, indoor soccer, specialized training venues, and other youth sports.

As this occurred, youth sports became a career track and the primary source of income for some adults. Most of these people were well intentioned and committed to a combination of sports and child development. But they also needed youth sports to provide them with year-round income, because they had families to feed, fields to maintain 12 months a year, utility bills to pay, and staff that needed year-round employment.

This meant that dues-paying parents of young people in these programs had to be convinced that year-round memberships and participation were absolutely essential for the future success of their children— for their focus, skills, self-confidence, acceptance into college, college scholarships, careers, and even professional sport contracts.

The ensuing marketing spin that surrounded this selling of specialization was in part legitimized by the success of East German and Soviet athletes who were widely thought to have specialized in a particular sport from a very early age.

Additionally, there were some opportunistic hustlers who received media attention hyping their highly specialized sport academies; and there were others who founded volleyball, tennis, soccer, and other competitive-tournament-based programs that focused the attention of parents and young athletes on championships at the community, district, state, regional, and even national levels. The success of these youth-sport entrepreneurs and the extent to which they influenced private youth sport programs nationwide was amazing.

The results were significant and nearly immediate: longer seasons, more demanding practice and competition schedules, year-round participation, extensive travel to scheduled games and a growing array of tournaments, and high rates of early-childhood specialization in sports. Keeping up with the Jones’s kids became a coaching and parental preoccupation.

In this way, youth sports were almost completely transformed in a generation. New foundational philosophies and new goals were established and pursued by
coaches, parents, and players. These changes had an immediate impact on the everyday rhythm of family life as well as family relationships, budgets, and expenditures for youth sport participation. There were also significant changes in children’s play patterns and priorities, and a new, exclusive focus on the family rather than the local neighborhood and community as the sponsors of youth sports.

In fact, local communities became increasingly irrelevant as teams were composed of young people from wherever their parents were willing to drive to make sure their children trained with the best coaches. The livelihood of these coaches depended on competitive success and year-round participation in their programs. If their young athletes succeeded, it was easier to recruit the next cohort of families and players as dues-paying members of their teams, clubs, and programs.

Of course, the new youth-sport organizers, entrepreneurs, and hustlers did not make changes in youth sports by themselves. Their success depended on cultural timing and compatibility with the larger social context of the United States. That is, their programs had to resonate with parents and what parents wanted for their children. After all, it was parents who registered children for programs, paid fees, bought uniforms, and gassed up SUVs to drive the family to practices, games, tournaments, and national championships at Disney World.

**Development of Unique Ideas About Parenthood**

As the emphasis on individualism and personal responsibility became the mantra of the 1980s, ideas about parenthood and what constituted a good parent underwent significant changes. For the first time in any society, parents in the United States were held totally responsible for the whereabouts and actions of their children, 24/7, 365 days a year. Although this exclusive focus on the family and these expectations for parents had always been defined as unrealistic and impractical throughout human history, they were embraced by the majority of people in the United States.

Due to this cultural shift, the moral worth of parents became directly linked to the actions and achievements of their children. If a child succeeded, especially in a highly visible, culturally valued activity, moms and dads could legitimately claim parental moral worth, and others -- especially other parents -- would likely grant it to them. Most people viewed this as appropriate, but it create a new reality for parents -- one that parents in previous generations had not experienced.

The idea that the character and actions of children were shaped exclusively by parents led mothers and fathers to dedicate themselves to the success of their children in ways that few parents had ever done before.

Many became obsessive about nurturing the dreams of their children and seeking culturally valued and professionally supervised activities for them. Youth sports were seen as ideal because they were highly valued, visible, and organized to emphasize progressive skill development; in some cases, they were even given media coverage, which parents valued because it added legitimacy to their claims of moral worth.

The high-profile, professionally administered, exclusive, specialized, and usually expensive youth sport programs were identified by many parents as ideal contexts for controlling their children and making sure they were in a visible and culturally valued activity. Finding these activities and sponsoring the involvement of their children enhanced parental moral worth, especially when children were successful and steadily progressed to higher levels of competition. Parents embraced these programs to meet what became powerful cultural expectations. They expended time, energy, and money to keep their children in sports. Additionally, they dedicated themselves to being chauffeurs, assistant coaches, team moms, purchasing agents, laundresses, uniform and equipment dealers, facility managers, board members, phone-tree participants, emailers, web site managers, and overall supporters of their children’s sport dreams.

Some parents developed ambivalent feelings about these roles and expectations and privately questioned the merits of young people playing year round in a single sport. This ambivalence was expressed as they bragged and then complained about the time and energy they devoted to nurturing the sport achievements of their children.

They made sure their children were on time for early-morning practices, they left work early to drive to afternoon practices and competitions, they dedicated weekends and vacations to competitive events, they made payments and put thousands of miles on SUVs as they chased youth sport schedules and tournaments here and there.

They paid club fees and fees for private coaching sessions. They stayed in hotels and seldom had unhurried meals while they were on the road. The more they did, the more legitimate were their claims for parental moral worth. To do more than other parents proved their moral superiority. At the same time, they often complained about the impact of these things on their lives. Despite the ambivalence of some parents, extreme cases of parental sport sponsorship
became heralded as the epitome of parental moral worth. For example, when Shawn Johnson’s parents put an additional mortgage on their home to continue nurturing Shawn’s Olympic gymnastic dreams, NBC commentators identified them as ideal parents. During the 2008 and 2010 Olympic Games in Beijing and Vancouver, media coverage regularly focused on athletes’ parents as commentators and journalists praised their dedication and willingness to subordinate their own lives to their child’s quest for sport achievements.

Even Johnson & Johnson, a major sponsor of NBC Olympic coverage, created a special advertising campaign called “Thanks, Mom” to remind everyone that “Behind every Olympic champion is a ... mom [who provides] love and care ... to help their children achieve their goals” (for descriptions of the campaign and the families it highlighted, see Johnson & Johnson, 2008). Olympic medals were won by sons and daughters, but they were merit badges of moral worth for parents.

To illustrate the dramatic changes in ideas about parenthood over the past two generations, I often note that when I excelled as a young athlete, my parents were told by others, “You’re lucky to have Jay as a son.” A generation later, when my son and daughter excelled at tennis and played in the regional mixed doubles finals for the U.S. Open (amateur division), people often declared, “You must be proud of your kids.” But when a child excels in a sport today, the parents are asked, “How did you create this athlete?” Being lucky or proud is no longer the issue, because parents are now seen as the architects of a child’s success.

This was demonstrated in 1997, when Earl Woods out-earned his son by selling and talking about his book, Training a Tiger: A Father’s Guide to Raising a Winner in Both Golf and Life (1997). Like other parents of age-group champions, Earl Woods was identified as the raison d’etre of his son’s success, and other parents wanted to know how he did it. In two short generations, parents went from being lucky and proud to being the creators of child athletes.

Of course, the downside of defining parental moral worth in connection with the success of their children is that moms and dads are pushed to and beyond the limits of their resources as they sponsor and manage their children in youth sports. In the process, young people are controlled at the same time as adults cater to their needs within tightly confined spheres of experience, relationships, and identity formation. Young people may enjoy this, at least until mid-adolescence when they seek autonomy and opportunities to develop relationships and identities that require experiences beyond playing a single sport.

As noted in some of the articles in this feature, there is little research supporting the idea that the overall physical, psychological, and social development of young people is well served by specializing in a single sport. Adults working in youth sports may experience career benefits from such specialization, and parents may use it in the process of claiming moral worth as moms and dads, but young people are more likely to benefit from participation in multiple sports and physical activities.

This is explained in a 2010 position statement from the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (2010) titled, Guidelines for Participation in Youth Sport Programs: Specialization Versus Multiple-Sport Participation. Hopefully, these guidelines will encourage critical discussions about early childhood specialization in a single sport.
We are proud to announce the 20 winners of PCA’s 2013 Double-Goal Coach Award Presented by Liberty Mutual Insurance (listed below, alphabetically by last name).

“These coaches help youth athletes succeed on and off the field by striving to win while also pursuing the more important goal of teaching life lessons through sports,” said PCA Founder Jim Thompson.

“By creating a positive, character-building youth sports experience, they help youth develop into better athletes and better people.”

You can honor them on Twitter, Facebook and other social media, by clicking the icons at the upper right of this page. Each will receive a trophy, $250 and inclusion in our website, Momentum e-newsletter and media campaigns.

Congratulations to these award winners!

- **Alexa Caldwell**, Asheville School Lacrosse, Asheville, NC and Director, SportsChallenge Girls Lacrosse Program, Washington, DC
- **Don Heidary & Ron Heidary**, Orinda Aquatics, Campolindo High School Swimming (Ron Heidary), and Miramonte High School Swimming (Don Heidary), Walnut Creek, CA
- **Ron Campbell**, San Francisco Little League, Campbell, CA
- **Jackie Castro**, Palo Alto Soccer Club and Sacred Heart Preparatory, Palo Alto, CA
- **Andy Ekern**, Welles Park Cowboys Football, Chicago, IL
- **Gina Gant**, Santa Rita High School Volleyball, Rincon High School Basketball and Desert Spikers Volleyball Club, Tucson, AZ
- **Valeri Garcia**, North Natomas Little League, Sacramento, CA
- **Jade Gummer**, Lake Nona Junior Lions Mitey Mites Football (AAU), Orlando, FL
- **Jeff Guzak**, Lake Zurich Baseball & Softball Association, Lake Zurich, IL
- **Jay Johnson**, Stillwater Area Hockey Association, Lake Elmo, MN
- **Hardy Kalisher**, Boulder High School Soccer and FC Boulder, Boulder, CO
- **Darren Lawlor**, Pacific Ridge School Lacrosse, Carlsbad, CA
- **Matt Lawrey**, Prince William Soccer Inc., Woodbridge, VA
- **Keith Nighswonger**, Sunny Hills High School Water Polo and Fullerton Hills Water Polo Club, La Habra, CA
- **Marie Schweitzer**, Northern Virginia Soccer Club, Dumfries, VA
- **Jeff Smith**, McKinney High School Lions Football, McKinney, TX
- **Shawn Sullivan**, Scituate & Cohasset Youth Football, Scituate Basketball Association, and South Shore Regional Basketball (AAU), Scituate, MA
- **David Vollmer**, Lamar High School Men’s Lacrosse, Houston, TX
A rash of testosterone busts shows that just because baseball tests for drugs doesn’t mean it’s clean.

At some point late in the 2012 season Yasmani Grandal, a 24-year-old rookie catcher for the Padres, decided that he would use testosterone, a banned performance-enhancing drug, even though Major League Baseball conducts random drug tests, even though he risked a 50-game suspension and even though Giants outfielder Melky Cabrera and Athletics pitcher Bartolo Colon had recently been suspended for using similar substances.

Last week baseball announced Grandal flunked a test for elevated levels of testosterone (a source familiar with the case said the test occurred in September) and suspended him for the first 50 games of next season. Grandal accepted the test result and ruling without appeal.

The apparent confidence with which Grandal made the decision to use testosterone was more revealing than the announcement of the flunked test. It is a decision more and more baseball players are making, especially when it comes to fast-acting synthetic testosterone, which can aid in strength gains, muscle recovery and tissue repair. The substance can be applied to the skin in the form of creams, gels or patches and become undetectable by routine drug tests in as little as 24 hours. The lesson for baseball is that players believe they can skirt detection, and even if they don’t, the prospect of losing 50 games and some credibility in exchange for enhanced performance is worth the risk.

Last season was a wake-up call for MLB. Six major leaguers were busted for PED use, the most in five years. The game has become so dirty that one scout said he includes notations in his reports about suspected use based on changes in body type and spikes in performance.

Many players believe they can use synthetic testosterone regularly as long as it’s done immediately after a drug test (baseball rarely, if ever, tests the same player on back-to-back days) or before an off day, thus allowing the 24-hour detection window to pass. Baseball officials have begun discussions with the players’ association about becoming more vigilant. They have considered two countermeasures. One is to run more carbon isotope ratio tests, which can distinguish between natural and synthetic testosterone. The other is to introduce “longitudinal study” protocols to chart a player’s testosterone and epitestosterone levels. A healthy male’s T:E ratio is relatively steady, so a spike would be an indicator of synthetic testosterone.

Meanwhile, according to a source MLB is studying the circumstances of flunked tests in the majors and the minors to detect any possible patterns and common denominators, such as geography, trainers or time of year.

One issue that has yet to surface is the prospect of strengthening the suspension for first-time offenders. Baseball officials believe that discrediting a player’s achievements adds weight to the 50-game ban for first-time offenders. Colon’s treatment, though, challenges that notion. Just two days before Grandal’s suspension, and with five games still remaining on Colon’s ban, the Athletics re-signed the 39-year-old pitcher. They guaranteed him $3 million, not including generous incentives — representing a raise of at least $1 million."

Jim Trotter is a senior writer for Sports Illustrated who also spent 10 years (1983-1993) as a sports reporter for Newsday.
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Club Coaching Education:
ONE CLUB’S METHODS

By John Leonard

Recently I received a letter from one of our nations better swim clubs from an assistant coach, who was pleased that his head coach had made the determination a decade or so before to internally educate ALL the team staff (20 plus coaches). In addition to sending half his coaching staff each year to the ASCA Annual Clinic, here’s a list of the significant things this club did to educate their coaches appropriately.

1. “Twice a year, we taught the home study courses of ASCA ourselves.”
   One coach taught the course to all the others. It could be threatening, because some different philosophies could be heard, but it taught them to listen first for commonalities, then for strategic differences, then for idiosyncracies. It taught them to be better listeners.

2. “We set up quarterly occasions for all assistant coaches to educate each other.”
   At one of our meets each quarter, the coaches got together for pizza and sodas, and the host team coaches gave a 60 minute presentation on a prearranged topic of interest.

3. “Pass it On.”
   After any national conference or local clinic that anyone went to, we made it tradition that you came home with a written report which you shared with everyone on the staff.

4. “Every Meeting is an Education Meeting.”
   We had coaches meetings once a month, with all hands on deck. Most of that meeting was logistics for the team. But EVERY meeting had 30 minutes of assigned education done by one of the assistants. They needed to research, study and present (WELL) for 30 minutes. This gave them practical and highly critiqued experience in presentation. The heard about it if was not good quality stuff.

The Job of Every Head Coach is to Educate their staff, and prepare them for positions of greater responsibility.

The greatest responsibility of all is replacing the coaches who “age up” and out of our sport. The above are just four ideas. Plenty of others exist.

Head Coaches, please take to heart and mind your responsibility to improve your own staff, in the ways you want your staff to improve and be better.

All the Best, JL
Today’s news is full of dramatic crises hitting a wide range of organizations and people. From the BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill to Tiger Woods’ marital problems, these play out in the media in ways that offer both cautionary tales and useful tips for associations. So here are 10 rules for crisis communication, gleaned from several high-profile cases.

1) **Decide if the situation really is a crisis.**

Sometimes you have to recognize something for what it is and have a sense of humor about it. For example, was the August 2010 meltdown by a JetBlue employee a real crisis? No. It was embarrassing, and it did inconvenience a number of passengers. But nobody got hurt or killed. Thanks to social media, the employee, Steven Slater, immediately became a cult hero to many working people across America. So the powers-that-be at Jet Blue did the smart thing: they poked some fun at themselves in a blog post and complimented their 2,300 flight attendants. This is a great example of using the social media to turn a negative into a positive instead of blowing it out of proportion.

2) **Follow your crisis management plan.**

Every organization needs a plan with a complete crisis communication component. If your organization has such a plan, get familiar with it and communicate accordingly. If not, create one as soon as possible. Begin by reviewing the model association crisis management and communication plans in ASAE’s online Models & Samples collection, and then search for articles and other resources there to help guide you through the process. When a crisis breaks, social media will soon be buzzing with random facts, opinions, speculation, misperceptions, and calls to action. So be sure to include a social media strategy in your crisis plan.
3) Respond Quickly.

If your members, the public, and others are framing your issue and defining the conversation, the situation is only going to get worse. Plan first, but then get out there and show you care about the problem and will have more information by a specific date and time. Just make sure you stick to that schedule.

4) Be Real & Be Personal.

Don’t get caught up in corporate-speak that can make your response seem cold and calculated. Speak from your heart and show some compassion. During the BP oil spill, people heard the official pronouncements but were unconvinced that the company really cared. Avoid legal jargon; use direct language that is less likely to be misinterpreted.

5) Make Sure Your Facts Are Correct!

Remember the West Virginia mining accident when the governor announced that the miners were alive but in fact they were dead? Not good. If you’re not sure of the facts, explain that you are still investigating the situation and will provide further updates when you get the answers.

6) Identify a knowledgeable, credible spokesperson

During a crisis, one person should be designated to deliver updates, and the media should know whom to go to. When others attempt to speak in an official capacity (such as the West Virginia governor in the mining accident), the results can be disastrous. For an association facing a major crisis, the spokesperson is usually the chief staff executive but could be the board chair. In any case, a key leader must be in charge. The only time CEOs should delegate responsibility or spokesperson duties is when their credibility is damaged beyond repair.

7) Be Brief, Clear, and Honest.

We live in a sound-bite world. Only short, vivid statements will break through the clutter and be remembered. Distill your messages to their essence and deliver them boldly and in an interesting way. But don’t ask for sympathy. Remember the infamous line from BP CEO Tony Hayward: “I’d like my life back.”

8) Apologize, accept responsibility, and TAKE ACTION.

Saying you’re sorry is very important. So is being accountable, as when BP was forced to acknowledge that its safety procedures weren’t adequate and when Tiger Woods admitted it was his fault that he was unfaithful to his wife. But words mean nothing if you don’t take steps to solve the problem. Make sure you have a solid action plan that is likely to produce real, measurable results you can report to your members and in future media briefings.

9) Fix Misperceptions.

Be transparent. State the truth. Admit mistakes. Explain the situation further. If exposed to the truth, the collective wisdom of the crowd will rise to the surface in the social media. That’s one reason why you should never lie. Another Reason: Lying never works. Although it seems obvious, even US presidents have broken this basic rule.

10) Finally, know when to let go.

No negative story lasts forever, even though it may seem like it. Even BP is fading from the news pages. Every story is different, but use your best judgement to assess when the story has run its course and you have done all you can shape it. You don’t want to prolong a problem or make it worse.
SPORT SPECIALIZATION
Developmental and Learning Issues
By Crystal F. Branta

When addressing issues related to sport specialization, it is important to consider how skills are developed and learned. Changes in physical development and maturation throughout the growing years affect the motor performance abilities of individuals who are not yet mature. Such variability in skill development is important to understand when determining the impact of sport specialization on children and youths. This article addresses models of motor development that may be useful in examining the effects of sport specialization and discusses the variability of maturation among children during their growth years.

Motor Development Models
The development of motor skills begins prenatally with reflexive actions and continues in the toddler years with more spontaneous and voluntary skills. Involuntary reflexes such as the stepping reflex and spontaneous movements such as bouncing up and down serve as the basis for the future ability to execute voluntary movement actions. Seefeldt and colleagues (Seefeldt, 1980; Seefeldt, Reuschlein, & Vogel, 1972) and Clark and Metcalf (2002) discussed models that help us understand how reflexes and spontaneous movements provide the foundations for more complex motor skills.

Seefeldt (1980) presented a pyramid to illustrate how individuals reach competency in the skills required to participate in sports, games, and dances in our society (figure 1). In his model, reflexes form the base of the pyramid, underneath the most important level of fundamental motor skills (FMS) development. It is imperative to acquire a wide variety of skills of locomotion, object control, and stability before moving up the pyramid to the levels of combined skills and finally sport-specific games. If children do not acquire a good repertoire of FMS, they confront a proficiency barrier that makes it more difficult to be successful at higher levels of skill acquisition.

Similarly, Clark and Metcalf (2002) used the metaphor of a “mountain of motor development” to discuss how individuals develop competencies in motor skills as they become skilled performers. An important aspect of their model is the wide base near the bottom of the mountain range as the place for development of basic skills of movement such as running, jumping, throwing, catching, kicking, striking, and so on. As individuals develop competencies, they are able to move up a mountain to become skilled, depending on factors such as their environment, opportunities, and motivation to practice. If individuals develop a good base of skills, they can become proficient in a variety of sports, or show multiple peaks in the mountain range. If individuals lack basic skills, they encounter difficulty moving up the mountain -- the proficiency barrier. While there are other aspects of the mountain metaphor not addressed in this article, the key points are similar to those of the pyramid model:

1. Children should be exposed to and develop a wide base of FMS early in life to serve as a solid foundation for future movement activities.
2. Without such a repertoire, individuals encounter a proficiency barrier that hinders their ability to become skilled performers.
3. The more skills people develop early in life, the more “degrees of freedom” they have to participate in, be successful in, and enjoy a wide variety of sports. They have more options to move.

These key points need to be considered carefully when discussing the effects of sport specialization on children and youths. Children who specialize early in a sport will most likely not develop a wide variety of FMS. They will probably practice only those skills necessary for their specific sport and will miss the chance to acquire a multitude of FMS important to participating in a range of physical activities later in life. Because of the time commitment to their sport, their skill-development base will be vertical and narrow on the mountain or pyramid as opposed to wide. They may be disadvantaged later in life if they cannot continue in their specialty due to an injury, being cut, or incurring too much financial cost. Or they may choose to discontinue participation due to a lack of motivation or because their friends no longer play. For example, if children specialize only in soccer, they will become proficient in skills such as running, kicking, foot dribbling, and agility. However, they may never learn skills such as throwing, catching, jumping, and sliding that are required in other sports like basketball or softball. It is harder to acquire the FMS in the later teen to early-adult years than during childhood. Children who specialize before developing their base of FMS and before having a variety of experiences in movement games and sports may miss out on opportunities later in life or have more difficulty leading a physically active lifestyle as adults. In addition to FMS development, the timing of growth -- which varies among children and youths -- can influence skill performance.

Growth and Maturity
Young athletes vary considerably in size, shape, and maturity level. Normal nine-year-old boys, for example, can weigh 50 to 90 pounds and be 49 to 57 inches tall. The averages for girls at that age are 49 to 92 pounds and 48.5 to 56.5 inches (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2000). This normal variability exists throughout the growing years and can affect motor performance. Children who are taller and weigh more may have an advantage in activities requiring mass and strength, while
those who are shorter and lighter may do
better in sports requiring body rotation,
such as gymnastics.

However, a problem arises when the
level of maturation of the children is
not considered during the skill-learning
years. Early maturing (EM) individuals
usually are taller and heavier than their
peers during childhood. They often have
success in sports during the childhood
and early adolescent years due to their
size and the attention to skill improvement
they get from coaches. But they will
enter their pubescent growth spurt at an
earlier chronological age and usually stop
growing by the mid-teen years compared
to later maturing youths. Later maturers
(LM), on the other hand, are usually
shorter and lighter than their peers during
childhood and may not be able to compete
successfully against the EM in many of the
sports available to them through schools
and community programs. They often
either drop out of sport programs or, even
worse, are cut from programs during these
developmental years. The true irony here
is that LM individuals have the capacity to
out-grow EM because the LM do not start
their adolescent growth spurt until much
later in the growth cycle. This situation
affords them more years of bone growth
during childhood and they often end up
being taller adults than their EM peers.

Adults who allow children to specialize
too early in life without understanding
the ramifications of maturity level and
the process of gaining adult stature may
not be helping the children at all. For
example, taller individuals during the
elementary and middle school years are
often forced to play center on their
basketball teams, at the expense of
learning the guard skills of ball control
and perimeter shooting. Unfortunately,
these taller individuals most likely are EM
who will stop growing in their early teens.
They often enter high school and find that
many of their peers are becoming taller
than they are. If the EM individuals have
good basic skills that can be used across
positions, then they have better chances
of remaining in basketball. Individuals
who specialize too early in life often do
not have a good base of motor skills for
when they need to change positions, or
even sports, due to their specific levels
of biological maturation.

Longitudinal vertical jump data from the
Motor Performance Study at Michigan
State University (Branta, Haubenstricker,
& Seefeldt, 1984; Haubenstricker, Branta,
& Seefeldt, 1999) illustrate the importance
of considering maturity level when making
decisions about sport specialization (figure
2). Fifty-three females were measured
from ages nine to 15 years on their
physical growth and their performance on
a set of motor tasks. They were classified
as early, average, or late maturers based
on the ages at which they grew the
fastest. At age nine the girls’ means
for the vertical jump were virtually the
same. By age 12 the EM group had a
distinct advantage over the average and
especially the LM individuals. However,
by age 15 the LM girls had almost caught
back up to the performance level of the
EM, and the slope of their improvement
was steeper than for the EM girls. These
changes are normal and are influenced
by the timing of the adolescent growth
spurt, which is a biological event that is
out of the control of youths.

Summary
Because sport specialization has
numerous ramifications for youth
development and can influence
opportunities for later involvement
in physical activity, adults who are
responsible for the welfare of children
and youths should consider it carefully.
Individuals should develop a wide base
of FMS during the preschool and early
elementary years in order to achieve
proficiency in motor skill development.
Specialization limits the accrual of a
repertoire of FMS that provides the
basis of all future motor development.
This limitation may inhibit future options
and opportunities for youths to be
engaged in a variety of rewarding sport
experiences. The development of a solid
base of FMS should not be sacrificed for
the sake of specialization.

Specializing without understanding the
influence of biological maturation and
growth is also problematic. Physical growth
and maturation timing vary among youths.
Later-maturing individuals who may lag
in skill performance early in life have the
potential to outgrow their EM peers. They
should be given the opportunity to remain
in sport and skill-learning situations
during these formative years in order to
achieve motor proficiency. Likewise, EM
individuals may “grow out” of an assigned
position in a sport. They should therefore
be allowed to experience various positions
in their sports in order to develop the
skills that match their biological growth
as teenagers. Both skill development and
biological maturity need to be understood
in order to make an informed decision
related to sport specialization.

Crystal Branta is an associate professor of
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physical growth, biological maturation,
and motor development of children and youth,
with special emphasis on early childhood.
PRACTICE Makes PERFECT
And Other Curricular Myths in the Sports Specialization Debate

The Promises & Pitfalls of Sport Specialization in Youth Sport.

By Jody Brylinsky

The common debate regarding the utility of sport specialization begins with the notion that early talent identification, mixed with early sport-specific training will result in improved long-term sport performance. This assumption is based on the notion that “practice makes perfect” and that the more practice an athlete can get, the greater the likelihood of developing elite performance at the earliest possible time.

The counter-argument advises against early specialization to avoid athlete burnout, overuse injuries, and possible misidentification of actual talent. The assumption is that athletes who play multiple sports are safe from the noted pitfalls found in early specialization simply because they are exposed to different sport contexts.

This article presents a different focus on the specialization debate, one that changes the focus to the quality of sport instruction regardless of the level of specialization in training. It suggests that many of the negative consequences of early sport specialization may be avoided with appropriate coaching and sport skill instruction.

Rather than debating whether athletes should be engaged in early sport specialization or not, the focus should be on the quality of the training and sport skill instruction that the athlete receives, regardless of the training context.

Using the analogy of looking at the “ecology” of an organism, we know that the tallest trees grow from the hardiest seeds, in the richest soil, in the most direct sunlight, with protection from harmful animals, and when given the maximum amount of time to mature before being harvested.

Similarly, we know that elite athletes come from good genes, and a common idea about how best to develop elite performance is to identify talent early, create a specialized environment, and watch talent grow.

But I believe that the issue of training mode and instruction should be viewed from a more multifaceted, interdependent perspective. It is not the specialization or diverse sport-training experience that is critical, but the type of training and instruction provided in any training context. In his popular book, Outliers, Gladwell identified a complex set of interrelated events that lead to extraordinary success as someone is gaining a cumulative advantage - “one initial advantage that leads to other additional opportunities that make the initial genetic difference a bit bigger, and more powerful, resulting in a clear separation as an outlier.” Sport skill instruction and sport training that focus on long-term athlete development provide the cumulative advantage to nurture talent, regardless of the training context in which it is offered.

The following 4 training myths should be challenged in order to provide the right environment for developing talent in young athletes in specialized or diverse sport experiences.

Myth #1
The first myth says that only youth sport specialization leads to the quantity of practice necessary to develop elite sport performance. The “10 year-rule of necessary preparation” by Simon and Chase or the “10,000 hour-rule” by Ericsson became the mantras supporting early sport specialization. Coupled with the highly publicized success of professional athletes such as Tiger Woods and the Williams sisters, parents and coaches discouraged multiple-sport participation for youths in order to accumulate enough hours in one sport to reach expert status as soon as

Appropriate coaching can make all the difference.

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While sport specialization seems to provide the necessary quantity of practice, current research accurately acknowledges that the training content is a more important factor.

The real issue here is the need for accumulating exposure to training that will develop relevant sport skills.

However, Ericsson, Krampe, and Tesch-Romer also asserted that training quality was equal to quantity in importance and introduced the notion of deliberate practice—practicing a well-defined task with an appropriate difficulty level for the particular individual, getting informative feedback, and having opportunities for repetition and corrections of error.

Simply exposing young athletes to hours and hours of practice, without also stressing an appropriate instructional and training context, will not lead to the desired effects. Also critical is meticulous practice planning that includes drills that simulate performance requirements and provides precise assessment and correction of both technical and tactical skills.

The training must also include a continuous level of training adaptation and a purposeful focus on the most essential component skills for expert performance. So while sport specialization seems to provide the necessary quantity of practice, current research accurately acknowledges that the training content is a more important factor.

It should be noted that multiple-sport participants can also receive the necessary exposure to instruction and training to achieve expert sport performance. Many sports, especially those at the youth level, rely on basic motor skills, generalized physical training, and common tactical strategies to build the necessary cumulative sport experience.

A diversified approach to early athletic opportunities allows athletes to develop general capabilities, reducing the amount of sport-specific training necessary later in life, as adolescents or young adult athletes. The developmental model of sport participation developed by Cote and Fraser-Thomas suggests that for at least adult-peak sports, athletes can accumulate the necessary hours of sport training from total involvement, even in other sports. Therefore, the important issue is to develop a long-term plan that challenges the athlete to improve on the important physical and cognitive skills necessary for sport success, while balancing the psychosocial costs associated with this level of commitment. The inefficiency of many sport-training sessions is of much more concern than whether the training is specialized or applied to multiple sport contexts.

The balance between training and recovery provides the adaptation necessary in Ericsson’s theory of deliberate practice. While multiple-sport participation is presumed to inherently provide a variation in training, this may not always be the case. Many sports require the same physiological demands and use similar training routines. Ideally, athletes involved in successive and diverse sports, similar to athletes in year-round singular-sport training, would be able to monitor and adjust training loads between sports or training sessions.

Myth #2
The second myth claims that elite performance is the result of deliberate practice on specialized skills. The deliberate practice framework described above suggests that sport specialization is necessary if young athletes do not want to be left behind in the race to the top. Certainly sports in which elite competition must be reached before puberty (e.g., women’s figure skating and gymnastics) provide little time to explore sport options; however, for the vast majority of sports (i.e., hockey, softball, volleyball) optimal performance is still possible with a diversified sport introduction and more time for informal play.

In fact, research is now suggesting that there are tremendous benefits to deliberate play—activities regulated by age-adaptive rules controlled by children to maximize enjoyment. In deliberate play, children use experimentation of movements without worrying about performance outcomes, fostering an implicit approach to instruction. Implicit instruction, or guided-learning, can result in increased retention of new skills, reduced occurrence of reinvestment in complex skills, a heightened sense of competence, and a greater resistance to stress.

Fortunately children will allocate concentration and effort in the pursuit of deliberate play, providing a natural source of implicit instruction, if given the freedom to do so. Coaches should plan for informal training situations that encourage improvisation and role playing rather than pure repetition. Additionally, coaches should use fun analogies in conveying instruction and feedback to allow for
chunking (recoding of information for more efficient storage and recall) of motor and perceptual information, as well as to increase enjoyment. However, counting on diverse sport opportunities to naturally provide “deliberate play” or “implicit instruction” would be a mistake.

Just changing the sport context does not create these useful instructional techniques. So, while both deliberate play and implicit instruction contribute to the skill development process, they must both be purposely planned in skill instruction. Diverse sport experiences will not necessarily produce these learning environments any more than sport specialization prohibits them.

**Myth #3**

The third myth maintains that specialization allows the coach to plan what to do. Regardless of the training context—specialized sport or diverse sport opportunities — the most critical element influencing athlete outcomes is the planning capabilities of the coach.

Practices that provide either frequent periods of inactivity or endless, and usually meaningless, repetitions of sport skills do not enhance athlete development. Coaches must plan for maximum use of practice time through continuous action-based instruction, deliberate play (if appropriate), or highly structured inactive time, with a selection of drills that match the performance demands of the sport.

Coaches should consider the pace of instruction that best allows athletes to engage in the cognitive processes of planning and reviewing the movement skills at an appropriate level of physical training. Whether to provide random, blocked, or a series of practice trials; when to provide demonstration of skills; and what form of feedback to give must all be considered when either sport specialization or diverse sport-training models are planned. It would be a mistake to assume that diverse sport opportunities will provide more problem-solving experiences for athletes than specialized single-sport training. Highly qualified coaches will be able to provide an abundance of meaningful practice drills that maximize active participatory-learning in either context. Unqualified coaches, even in a diverse sport environment, may have limited ability to develop an interactive practice or facilitate athlete-led error detection and correction.

Effective planning in both the specialized and multisport training model should focus athletes’ attention on what they need to do better and what is limiting their performance. Too many specialized sport practices are misspent in rote repetition and place too few cognitive demands on athletes in order to over-learn successful skills. Instead, training for automaticity should focus on reducing the attention on skills and on developing the essential multitasking skills that elite athletes will need.

Strategies include the use of dual-task practice activities - using a demanding secondary task concurrently with the practice of primary sport skills - or decision criteria similar to competition, such as calling out balls and strikes during batting practice. Planning should promote the development of self-regulation, decision making, feelings of competence, and connectedness by giving athletes, even at a young age, ownership of the design and flow of practice.

**Myth #4**

The fourth myth contends that sport specialization is the only sport form that promotes the individual coach-athlete relationships necessary to maximize athlete learning and commitment. Research continues to show the advantages of having access to expert coaches.

Not only are expert coaches highly capable in designing deliberate practice and play, but they do so in an environment of emotional warmth while communicating expectations for high standards. This is not the mindless overuse of praise, but rather deliberate personalized instruction and positive discipline. The most noted expert coach, the late John Wooden, used stem, brief dialogues in practice, never used physical punishment, and used every communication to teach.

Research in early education (but applicable to all grades) indicates that good teachers personalize the material, providing direct personal responses to student-initiated statements or actions.

Contrary to reports of the regimented, carefully planned, practice activities of coaches such as Wooden, many expert teachers are observed to possess a knack for flexibility in how learning activities progress in the classroom.

The best teachers are those who demonstrate a high degree of emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support, and engage in reciprocal interactions in facilitating student activity. The use of high-quality feedback, where there is a back-and-forth exchange between the athlete and coach in order to gain a deeper understanding, leads to better student performance.

Coaches can provide this interaction by showing an interest in the early success of their athletes through consistent positive reinforcement, clear monitoring of progress, and eventually a greater emphasis on self-reinforcement as the athlete develops. Coaches also need to spend time planning and locating the physical and social resources that athletes will need to overcome the effort and motivational constraints of deliberate practice.

**CONCLUSION**

The debate regarding the push for sport specialization or diverse multiple-sport training experiences for young athletes is important because it leads us to ask critical questions about the nature of the design, intensity, and consequences of purposeful sport training.

The lessons to be learned, however, lie in what the dialogue tells us about the need to focus on quality training and instruction in either sport setting. In both contexts, coaches and parents need to follow evidence-based guidelines for designing practices and to implement those practices with sound standards-based coaching behaviors.

Dr. Jody Brylinsky has chaired the writing team for the 2nd revision of the National Standards for Sports Coaches, and contributed to the National Coaching Report: The State of Coaching in the U.S. She has been a college coach and athletic director, USOC Project Gold participant and current Special Olympic Coach volunteer. Research interests include all aspects of coach education and coach development, social and cultural issues in sport and sport psychology.
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Guest Speakers:

GUY EDSON

Guy Edson serves several roles as the Technical Director of the American Swimming Coaches Association’s national office. Before joining ASCA Edson was a full time professional coach for 15 years coaching state champion age group teams in three states and placing over 40 swimmers on the national top 10 listing including one national record holder. He an ASCA Level 5 Age Group Coach who continues to coach with a local team where he delights in teaching a novice group of 20-30 swimmers.

DR. DAVID C. SALO

Dave Salo came to USC as one of the most successful club and national coaches in the country. Now in his seventh season as the Trojans head men’s and women’s swimming coach, Salo is firmly entrenched among the NCAA’s top collegiate coaches. Additionally, his wildly successful Trojan Swim Club has made him a go-to coach for top-shelf swimmers around the world who are seeking to propel their careers even further. Salo’s remarkable career was honored in 2010 when he was inducted into the ASCA Hall of Fame. Further validating his strength as a coach, he recently completed his third US Olympic staff coaching assignment, serving as a 2012 US Olympic women’s swim team assistant coach.

Following the 2012 NCAA season, Salo saw many of his swimmers flourish on the international stage. A whopping 13 swimmers from USC competed for a combined 10 countries at the 2012 Olympics. Recent graduate Rebecca Soni, one of many post-graduate swimmers still thriving under Salo, won her second straight gold in the 200m breast with a world-record while also earning gold during another world record in the 400m medley relay and took silver in the 100m breast. At the 2011 World Championships, Soni earned 3 gold medals and one bronze.

Hayley Anderson won silver in the Marathon 10K. Recent graduate Clement Leferd won one gold and one silver for France on relays while Trojan great Ous Mellouli won gold for Tunisia in the Marathon 10K to go with a bronze in the 1500m free. Katinka Hosszu won three golds and a silver at the European Championships and at the 2012 FINA Short Course Worlds, she won two golds as well. Jasmine Tosky, a 2013 freshman, won gold on the US 800y free relay as well.

Clinic Schedule:

SATURDAY
8 AM - 3 PM ASCA Level 3 Physiology of Training School (The Planning & Execution of Training for All Ages)
Instructor: Guy Edson, ASCA

3:30 - 6:30 PM SwimAmerica Training Session
For: Program Directors and Site Supervisors* (Additional Fee)
*Call Julie to Register: 1 (800) 356-2722

SUNDAY
ASCA’s Advanced Backstroke School
9 AM - 10 AM History of the Breaststroke Coach Guy Edson, ASCA

10 – 12 NOON Current World Class Biomechanics of Breaststroke Coach David Salo, USC

12 PM - 1 PM Lunch Break

1 PM - 3 PM World Class Breaststroke Training Coach David Salo, USC

3:15 - 4:15 PM Teaching Progression for Freestyle to New Swimmers Coach Guy Edson, ASCA

4:15 - 5 PM Modern Coaching: 12 Rules for Working with Today’s Age Group Athletes Coach Guy Edson, ASCA

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Fax: (954) 563-9813 Web: SwimmingCoach.org

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[Form for registration]
Swimming is Life Preparation.

The US Bureau of Statistics data indicate that over 30% of all managers and professionals work more than 49 hours per week. Meanwhile, an article in “The Economist” tells us that the top 1% of American professionals work more than 60 hours a week. (Top 1% by salary.)

Clearly, attaining the “American Dream” is possible, but the common denominator is “HARD WORK.”

A parent recently said to me while watching a practice, “I think these kids are amazing.” She was referring to their work ethic, their willingness to get out of bed early in the morning and go push themselves quite seriously in the pool. My response. “Please don’t tell them that.”

“Clearly, attaining the “American Dream” is possible, but the common denominator is “HARD WORK.”

Well, I still think they are amazing.” I didn’t disagree, but one thing I know after forty-two years of coaching is that if you tell someone they are doing something “amazing”, it becomes very hard to replicate.

If you treat exceptional as the norm, everyone raises their game and continues to work harder to get better. It’s good to be proud of our accomplishments in the area of consistent hard work. It’s better to not be “too” impressed with ourselves and just accept the fact that we can always do better and always do more.

And it’s not about lessons for swimming; it’s about lessons for life, as we can see from the statistics above.

Yes, those who work hard and achieve are exceptional. Moms, Dads and Coaches can all be proud of that.

All the Best, JL
What is ethical coaching and why is it important? What role does ethical coaching play in athletic training and youth sports? Aren’t coaches recognized for athletic performance? Should there be some dual mandate for coaches? Can’t we leave the ethics to the parents? Are we even being paid for this?

“The Big Picture” – Our View

As time and years go on, we become more convinced that what can and should be gained from sports is truly invaluable and can be life-changing. For the countless hours committed, the physical, emotional, and financial commitment, and the sacrifices made, there has to be more than a fast time at the end of this process. Every time we see a youth sports team, from T-ball to collegiate athletics, we wonder what will be the real reward from all of this. After thirty years, we have no doubt that sports do have the ability to stimulate extraordinarily positive changes in an athlete’s life. Too often in swimming, we see careers stray for the wrong reasons: overzealous parents, coaches with a single-minded focus on winning, kids obsessed with times or ego, and poor role models. Athletes become concerned more about who they beat in practice rather than whom they helped and seem to care more about their time and place rather than their effort and attitude (life skills). Energy and effort can flow into areas that actually break down a career rather than support its health and longevity. An environment driven by ethics can significantly mitigate this.

In a broader sense, coaching is much more a life process and a people process rather than an athletic process. Not only are kids wrapping their lives around a team, training, a process and a coach, but in many ways, their emotional development, college decision, and the person they become will be shaped by this process as well.

Our mission is to be more than a coach, but rather a partner with our swimmers on their athletic journey, and to a greater extent, partners on their life journey. Our ultimate goal is that four or eight years from now they are swimming at their very best, are loving the sport, are leaders on their teams, and most importantly, are better people.

Ethical coaching comes down to ethical living and purity of heart and intention. Ethical coaching is and should be all-encompassing. It should apply to every swimmer, every parent, every staff member, and every policy. It should be an unwavering commitment and conviction to do the right thing in every area and any circumstance. Not only should ethical coaching exist, but it should be a cultural pursuit. This should be a lifestyle that defines the team environment and its success. Companies, organizations of every kind, and virtually every athletic team posses some kind of mission statement or value list, and ethics is always intertwined. It is to be what guides them, shapes their actions, and defines their environment. It reads well, sounds inspiring, and offers hope.

Too often though, organizations do not connect to this overriding message. Every day, we see ethical leadership break down in the athletic, political, and business arenas for reasons of ego, agenda, powers, greed, status, and money. There seems to be a departure from words and concepts to being and reality. How do you embed a few phrases or concepts into a large organization and hundreds of people with varying degrees of interest or participation? How much do athletes, or parents for that matter, understand the mission statement, embrace it, commit to it, and actually take ownership and pride of those very
concepts: integrity, work ethic, respect, teamwork, and personal growth to name a few? This must be a top-down approach.

Some coaches struggle with balancing environment and success. Is a program driven by performance or experience? The greatest leaders in the world (many in coaching) are adept at not only focusing on the greater good but also creating the greatest achievement. They adhere to the highest ethical standards while achieving extraordinary results. Both culture and success are possible and we would argue the former enhances the latter.

Ethical coaching must first be articulated as a vision and a mission. And it must be defined not by individual members, isolated actions, trends, or even success, but by a group with vision that knows well the constituency, the organization's goals, the traits that it would like the organization to embody, and even the community and peripheral groups. That message must then be sold aggressively to everyone directly or indirectly involved in the group or process. It should be omnipresent, wrapped around the team like a blanket. It should become so prevalent that it is the only message seen, heard, offered, and accepted. Coaches must not only be the salesmen, but be the example as well. And if fully embraced, it should stay with the athletes beyond the athletic setting; in the locker room, at home, or a social setting. This will truly reveal an athlete's connectedness.

And finally, the organizational leaders or staff must enforce it with vigor, tact, integrity, and enthusiasm. In our program, we use “we” in selling, promoting, and disciplining. To reinforce the mission and ethics, we state aggressively that “we will be a program driven by character” and there is no other option. When disciplining, we simply say, “We do not do that or represent that. You must embrace this concept or find another program. It is just not who we are.”

Addressing ethics on a case by case basis becomes problematic without a firm backdrop that has predefined a team’s position on sensitive issues. Your best swimmer comes to practice late regularly. A popular swimmer uses bad language. A Board member’s child is blatantly disrespectful. A “group” decides they don’t agree with a policy or coaches’ decision. The absence of a mission and an (ethical) cultural landscape can exacerbate issues or conflicts like these and complicate their resolution.

And no, we do not get paid for this, monetarily that is. Its compensation comes in the form of emotional dividends that changes lives (of coaches and swimmers) on a daily basis, forever.

There can be extraordinary and very tangible benefits to employing an ethics based/“Character First” environment. We have witnessed these firsthand over the past few decades. A few are; a positive culture driven by work ethic, humility, great and consistent role models, mutual respect, and team pride, less (or no) burnout, limited discipline issues, an extremely high percentage of swimmers swimming in college, and incredible team pride.

Concepts we employ that support a culture of integrity and success are:

Eliminate Negativity & Complaints

First, and obviously, if you want to be a high-level athlete, challenge is the only path to growth and development. Negativity is a cancer that has no place in athletics or in life. A saying we repeat often is, “If you complain about anything, you will complain about everything.” This is not and cannot be allowed.
“Be yourself – everyone else is already taken.”  Oscar Wilde

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Ethical Coaching (Continued)

Service Over Success
A life of service is a life of sincerity and purpose. As intense or aggressive as a program can be, it’s fundamental root can be of service, for swimmers and coaches. Service is the key to humility, character, and ethics. It is found in the “daily duty” of supporting one another and giving back. We share a great article entitled, “The Uncommon Professional, from Chicken Soup for the Soul,” about a common man in a common job, doing everything with uncommon professionalism. For us, this attitude translates into being the first one to the pool cover reel, to helping set up, to cheering for teammates, to getting the equipment for your lane, and even picking up after others.

People over Times
If people feel and know that you care about them as individuals first, they will do virtually anything for you and the team. Unconditional mutual respect must drive the coach-athlete relationship. This eliminates lying, deceit, disrespect; etc. This relationship is and should be a true partnership.

Humility Over Ego
An environment based on ego is toxic. We let kids know that if they have an ego, they have a problem (need attention). And without being a psychologist (although we play one on the deck), we let them know that their need for attention will not be satisfied or tolerated. This reason alone would prevent swimmers from moving up into higher training groups on our team. There is a quote that refers to two types of people, one who walks into a room and says, “Well, here I am,” and another who walks into a room and says, “Ah, there you are.” Needless to say, there should be room for only one of these two types of people on a team.

Team Over Individual
Athletes must learn early, that the team always comes first. Swimmers must place the team above themselves at all times. We suggest this is analogous to having the wind at your back as you move through a demanding season. From a coach’s and an individual’s perspective, decisions and policies should reflect only one thing, the greater good, and the team as a whole. Sacrifices become easy and automatic when individuals care about the team (and their teammates) unconditionally. A phrase we use is, “Teamwork takes work. It is created by you, not for you.”

I (Don) had a conversation with several senior (high school) swimmers recently. The conversation centered on choosing championship meet events. I posed the question simply, with no angle or supposition, wanting to hear from them what they felt their two best events were. I asked, “What would you like to swim at the League Championship Meet” (a shave meet for most)? Not one answered the question directly, i.e., “I want...”. This was the typical conversation

Coach: “What would you like to swim at the league meet?
Swimmer: “What would you like me to swim?
Coach: “No, I am asking you what you feel your best events are.”
Swimmer: “Whatever the team needs.”
Coach: “No, again, what’s best for you?”
Swimmer: “What is best for me is what is best for the team.”

Each swimmer basically answered the question the same way. When kids feel one with the team and connected, sacrifices become welcomed opportunities.

Owner/Partner
Coaches and swimmers should take ownership of the program and the environment. They should feel and act as if they are a partner or a shareholder. We tell our swimmers that they are all co-owners of the team, like it or not, want it or not, “you are a stakeholder, and thus accountable.”

Team Attire
Team attire is and should be a statement of pride and not a policy in and of itself. Your team attire is your representation of the team. We believe there is a correlation between one’s commitment to wear team attire and one’s general feeling about the team. Our swimmers do not compete in a meet or travel with the team if they are not in team attire. It is not about the clothes, or the rule, it is about what statement they are making with their appearance. Coaches should lead the way in this regard.

Build Leadership from Day One
Ethical coaching should support the leadership process. Every team and athlete must know that the younger members are future leaders and role models. Therefore, from day one, we begin building future leaders. Swimmers are made aware of the standards and responsibilities and what is expected of them now and in the future. Hazing or “tradition” as it is euphemistically put, that makes people feel less or inferior is not tolerated in any form and has no place in building young leaders. It simply becomes a rite of passage that allows individuals to “give back” what they “took”. It is a cycle that builds on itself.

Travel Lightly
“Integrity has no need of rules.” - Albert Camus

That is, travel with the absence of attitude, ego, or indiscretion. Our travel policy is very simple. If you need to be watched (or babysat), you need another team. We fully expect that our swimmers carry themselves as mature, dedicated athletes (and individuals) on a “business” trip. They owe this to the rest of the team, the culture that defines us, and their parents who pay and support them. We would even say that neutral behavior is not acceptable. They must add value. And if they can’t do that, not only should
they not be on the team, they really have no business being an athlete.

**Little Things are a Big Deal**

If one bad word is acceptable, then why not two? If one minute late is acceptable, then why not five? If one act of disrespect to another is tolerated, then why not to a group, or a coach? If it is acceptable to “cheat” on a lap, then why not a set, or a season? Ethics and character are black and white. There is no middle ground.

**Embrace Work**

Take the path of “most resistance” is a theme we ask the kids to embrace. They should welcome the most challenging aspects of swimming and their life, and reposition them as a positive, growth process. A quote that is relevant is, “Be aware when the going is easy, you may be headed downhill.”

**Embrace Academics**

Beyond the obvious need for an education, a diligent student represents a great deal more than his or her academics. We have seen academics and athletics work hand in hand and support and complement each other. The more an individual commits to either, the more the other is strengthened. Athletes that do not embrace academics are generally not leaders (in the student-athlete sense) and can become one-dimensional. Their lack of academic focus can open the door to less productive alternatives. Our process and objective is to foster and support student-athletes at the highest level. Our team must commit to both.

**Appreciation of Parents**

This is probably the most significant sign of character. As the saying goes, “Gratitude is the mother of all virtues.” A young adult that does not appreciate the unconditional commitment and support of their parents would typically be unappreciative of other key support functions and miss the broader parent-child connection. A sincere awareness and gratitude for that which supports an individual is a critical component to a well-rounded athlete, person, and team. We devote meetings to this topic and make it clear this is a part of our culture and mission.

**The Team Concept**

The team concept is a life concept and there is no better place to learn it than in an athletic setting. “Team” is family, friends, students, co-workers, community, and on and on. It is co-existing and co-producing. The ability to be a good team person or a leader can be developed in the pool and the locker room every day. It requires empathy, sacrifice, and an unconditional commitment to a greater cause. This ability and understanding will serve athletes long after their careers have ended.

**Don’t Push on a String**

As coaches, it can be easy to focus on the wrong thing; many try to win a battle when the “war” is not even understood. Rather than draw people into the process, we may actually create more separation by disciplining someone for poor behavior when they have nothing invested in the team. We try to fix a stroke in someone who doesn’t work hard. We condemn a parent without trying to bring them into the process. We try to win a meet with a team that has no identity, or criticize a group for not caring when they don’t know what to care about. It is critical to know at what level the individuals and the team resonate or connect to the mission of the team and the goals of the coach.

**A Puzzling Concept: Build Culture (and Success) from the Outside in**

The borders would be your vision. Then work your way in with philosophy, culture (a way of aquatic life), then add life lessons such as character, integrity, respect, humility and work ethic, along with policies and guidelines, which brings you to the center, revealing a picture of a strong culture with extraordinary results.

**A “Team” Issue with an Ethical Response**

The following is a real life example of a situation that was dealt with aggressively, and in our view, ethically. In this situation, many would have seen no issue, simply “young adults being young adults” away from the pool. We saw the seed of a breakdown in a culture that we were committed to build and foster. Many years ago, we became of aware that some of our swimmers were involved in an incident involving alcohol (not a team event or a team activity). These were great kids, committed swimmers, great students, and always respectful individuals. We, as coaches, were very upset and had a firm meeting with the entire senior group of over fifty swimmers. Prior to the meeting, we became aware that a few of the kids involved didn’t understand why their social life (outside of OA) was any of our concern. One swimmer even asked, “If my parents are OK with it, why do you care?” This was our response in a letter to the group:

“Let’s simplify the key issues for all of you to understand. We do not own your social life, nor do we want to. We do however own the team and have a responsibility to every member. That being said, ANYTHING that affects the team IS a team issue. Period. It does not need a memo attached or Board approval. One person or one action can become a “team” issue. Chatter in the locker room Saturday morning made it a team issue. If in your world, this is not a team issue, what is? Will you know when it is a team issue and when behavior threatens reputations, athletic careers, and even lives? We truly believe that we as coaches are infinitely better qualified than you to assess the effect on the “team”. You do not have to answer to parents, or rumors. You do not sit in living rooms defining our team and its environment to perspective members, or sit in Board meetings answering questions.

What you did was not legal, not right, not positive, not conducive to being a serious athlete, not responsible, showed no leadership, hurt parents,
and deeply affected coaches that have unconditionally supported you for most of your swimming lives. It is not obvious to us why someone could think this is “OK.” And the fact that your peers or friends may have done this does not legitimate it but rather suggests that you need to find other friends and better role models.

We have seen, up close, every aspect of substance abuse from alcoholism to hard drug abuse to endless rehabs, an abyss of a mother’s pain, and even prison. Please don’t insult us by telling us it is “no big deal.” Wait until your daughter tells you not to worry, that, “it’s no big deal.”

About five years ago, a swimmer walked on the deck of this pool and told us he wanted to join our team. We knew he was a known drug user. We pulled him aside and told him that we were aware of his reputation and his social life and while we would allow him a trial period, if we heard one word related to drugs spoken in front of any member of this team, at any time, he would be gone and regret this meeting. He chose not to join the team. You were about twelve years old at the time and neither you nor your parents were ever aware of a two-minute conversation that put your safety and the protection of this team ahead of a new member, added revenue, and his “social life.” So you tell us where a “social life” ends and “team” character begins. We may not know the exact answer but we will always err on the side of caution, for you.

And by the way, while some of you want to draw a line that separates this team from the rest of your life, we never have. We have never stopped caring about you or stopped supporting you when we leave the pool or take off our team jacket.

Some day you may have a thirteen, fourteen, or fifteen year old child and you will pray every time they walk out the door that they are safe and with good people doing the right things. You will pray that they can avoid drugs and alcohol, that they don’t lie to you, and that someone is looking out for them. You will also hope that they might find an athletic program that places a premium on character and doing what is right. While you would not assume it, you would take comfort in finding overprotective people that run the program, people who actually care about your child as a person, even when they are not at practice. You will be grateful for a second pair of eyes to watch over them. You will care less about their success as an athlete than you will about their safety and personal well-being. Ask any parent.

When we were kids, the most important part of sports was earning the respect of the coach, from an athletic and a personal perspective. Too often in this day, the coach is simply a spoke in the wheel of a teenager’s life, and not a partner. Today, focus is more about being happy and being “right” rather than being respected and doing what is right. We cannot, and will not, fit into that world. We want to be your partner and not someone who is dismissed when he is not in agreement with you. We are not administrators enforcing rules, we are simply people who care passionately about you bringing out the best that lies within you and those around you.

As for insight into our reaction, it is not when we care this much or get upset that you should be concerned. For this you should feel fortunate. It is when we stop caring that the greater loss and the greater problem begins. And if you are not into the whole “character first, do the right thing” thing, you should know that every college coach we talk to asks about it and praises us for emphasizing it.

Should you disagree with this, that is fine, it simply means that our priorities and our philosophies are completely opposed to one another and that this clearly is not the proper environment for you.”

Following this communication and meeting, the ethical culture, which would have been considered extraordinary at the time, became even stronger. The athletes and parents knew clearly our position and the team’s mission.

Orinda Aquatics is a Silver Medal team with 100 year-round swimmers. In 2010 the team qualified eight swimmers for Junior Nationals (men finishing ninth in Atlanta), had one Olympic Trial qualifier,
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thirty-five Sectional qualifiers, and traveled with fifty-three (high school age) swimmers to Clovis, CA with two coaches and no chaperones. On that trip, no one was ever late for a departure, there were no bed checks, everyone was in team attire the entire trip, and they cheered for their teammates throughout the meet, even in the rain. At Orinda Aquatics, you will never hear a word of profanity, see inappropriate attire, or see any swimmer disrespectful to a coach in the slightest degree. The average GPA of their sixty-five member Senior Group is 3.75.

Quotes and concepts that sell/convey the mission and ethics of the team:

“Great occasions do not make heroes or cowards; they simply unveil them to the eyes. Silently and imperceptibly, as we wake or sleep, we grow strong or we grow weak, and at last some crisis shows us what we have become.”

– Brooke Westcott, British Theology Professor

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**AARON PEIRSOL’S SWIMMING TIPS**

1. Work with your teammates to challenge yourselves on a daily basis.
2. On freestyle: Catch water with a high elbow; keep a strong, consistent kick behind you.
3. On backstroke: Keep your head still and enter with your pinky first.
4. On breaststroke: Work to perfect the timing of your pull and kick.
5. On butterfly: Work to find a rhythm and build that into your stroke.
6. Believe in your coaches and your training regimen.
7. Fitness and nutrition are important. What you do outside of the pool counts!
8. Use starts and turns to your advantage. Think of turns as something to perfect and get ahead, not a place to rest.
9. Always have fun and enjoy the process.
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