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What each student-athlete -- and their family -- should know: In Defense of the Multi-Sport Athlete

ROBBINSVILLE, NJ (January 8, 2013)-- Future all-world basketball star Michael Jordan also played football and baseball during high school. Hall of Famer Joe Namath was a standout hoops player at Beaver Falls High and upon graduation received offers from multiple Major League baseball teams ... before accepting a scholarship offer to play football at Alabama. NASCAR driving champion Jimmie Johnson -- the only man ever to capture five consecutive Cup Series championships -- was an excellent swimmer and water polo player during high school.

Yet despite the example of these and many other sports legends, an increasing number of high school student-athletes are specializing, by devoting all their time and energy to a specific sport at the exclusion of all others. In doing so, they often have the support, even encouragement, of coaches and families who perhaps envision a more advanced, developed competitor earning accolades at their current level ... and perhaps increasing their chances of competing at the next.

But, at least when it comes to high school athletes, the concept of specialization is all wrong. And the problem is that focusing on just one sport actually hinders a young person's athletic advancement.

"When you play a given sport -- whether it's football, or softball, or swimming, or whatever -- you use different muscles, tendons, and ligaments," explains Steve Timko, executive director of the [NJSIAA](#) (New Jersey State Interscholastic Athletic Association), which was founded in 1918 and numbers 433 accredited public, private, and parochial New Jersey high schools as its members. "But you'll never use *all* your muscles, tendons, and ligaments, so your body will naturally have weak spots, or gaps. And that's the thing -- when you play a different sport every season, you maximize your strength and your reflexes by training a much greater portion of the whole. You simply cannot do that by playing one game all the time."

Timko's comments mirror the philosophy of the increasingly popular fitness company CrossFit, Inc., which on its Web site specifically indicates that "Our specialty is not specializing." Instead, CrossFit gyms focus on a wide variety of exercises -- "broad, general, and inclusive" -- to stimulate optimum conditioning.

Another issue with focusing on a lone sport is that doing so tends to block a student-athlete from developing the widespread, diverse relationships that are so beneficial to the development of the individual.

"If a student plays a different sport during each of the three traditional seasons, it stands to reason they'll play alongside a greater number of their peers and learn from a larger number of coaches than if they're a one-sport athlete," says Timko. "Long after anyone is done with competitive athletics, they'll often still be able to tap into those relationships built while playing high school sports. A young person who is limited to focusing on a single sport loses out on making so many potentially valuable personal connections."

In their 2011 book *"Foundations of Physical Education, Exercise Science and Sport,"* authors Deborah Wuest and Charles Bucher maintain that children should play many different sports to experience different challenges and develop different motor skills. Early specialization, they say, prevents youngsters from establishing skills and interests outside of one sport. Likewise, a 2011 article on *Livestrong.com* noted that a sole focus on one athletic activity can result in burnout and eventually abandonment of that particular sport.

Yet another concern about high school-level athletes specializing is the potential negative impact on development of complex reasoning and problem-solving skills.

"Let's not lose sight of the fact that in athletics -- whatever the sport -- the brain plays a crucial role," notes Larry White, NJSIAA assistant director. "Whether it's a point guard dribbling up the floor, a quarterback assessing the defense while calling signals, or a short stop fielding a slow grounder with bases loaded, an immense amount of data needs to be analyzed, and decisions need to be made. Every sport presents unique cerebral challenges, so the teenage student-athlete focused on only one sport may lose an awesome opportunity to develop enhanced mental flexibility."

About the NJSIAA

Established in 1918, the New Jersey State Interscholastic Athletics Association (NJSIAA) is a voluntary, non-profit organization comprised of 433 accredited public, private, and parochial high schools. A member of the National Federation of State High School Associations, the NJSIAA conducts tournaments and crowns champions in 32 sports. Championship competition for girls is sponsored in basketball, bowling, cross country, fencing, field hockey, golf, gymnastics, lacrosse, soccer, softball, swimming, tennis, outdoor track, winter track, and volleyball. Boys' championships are determined in baseball, basketball, bowling, cross country, fencing, football, golf, ice hockey, lacrosse, soccer, swimming, tennis, outdoor track, winter track, volleyball, and wrestling.

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