

[NCSA Recruiting](#)

A few surprises in the data behind single-sport and multisport athletes

By [Jaimie Duffek, NCSA Head Recruiting Coach](#) March 28, 2017

USA TODAY High School Sports has a weekly column on the college recruiting process. Here, you'll find practical tips and real-world advice on becoming a better recruit to maximize your opportunities to play at the college level. Jamie Duffek was one of the top 50 high school softball players in Illinois who went on to play outfield for Drake University. Jamie is just one of many former college and professional players, college coaches, and parents who are part of the [Next College Student Athlete](#) team. Their knowledge, experience, and dedication along with NCSA's history of digital innovation, and long-standing relationship with the college coaching community have made NCSA the largest and most successful athletic recruiting network in the country.

“Your child should be a multisport athlete!” You’ve probably seen the fired-up Facebook posts and urgent cries for young athletes to accumulate sports like badges of honor. Ohio State football coach Urban Meyer has repeatedly said he recruits only multisport athletes. But is it realistic for your student-athlete to play multiple sports? Is it still possible to make it to the highest level when dividing up their time? Should every sport be treated the same? To answer these questions, we looked at the data.

Sport Specialization: The case for picking a sport and sticking to it

Sport specialization refers to athletes who dedicate themselves to playing one sport. These athletes live, breathe and sweat their sport, with strict practices throughout the year and stringent skills development.

A key factor to consider in sport specialization is the sport itself. NCAA recently collected information from 21,233 current NCAA student-athletes at Division I, II and III universities. When asked if they specialized in their sport, some interesting trends emerged. The study showed a high percentage of athletes who specialized were in gymnastics, soccer, tennis and ice hockey.

- 87% of DI women gymnastics had specialized in the sport by the age of 12.
- 68% of DI men’s soccer players and 62% of DI women’s soccer players were one-sport soccer athletes by 12.
- 66% of DI men’s tennis players and 75% of DI women’s tennis players specialized in their sport by age 12.
- 55% of DI men’s ice hockey players specialized in their sport by age 12.

There are plenty of reasons why it can be beneficial for athletes to specialize in one sport.

Earlier peak performance. For sports like gymnastics, athletes' peak performance is reached in adolescence. Experts agree that specialization enables these athletes to compete in their sport when it matters most.

Attain “age-group” success. Specialization may be the best way for athletes to experience “age-group” success. In other words, if it's a baseball player's dream to win the Little League World Series, committing to baseball by the age of six or seven is the way to gain success in this age group.

Join elite clubs with access to top coaches. By focusing on one sport from a young age, athletes have access to elite clubs and programs that attract top coaches. These best-in-class coaches have resources at their disposal to help players develop the skills they need to play their sport at the highest level.

Achieve the 10,000-hour rule. Many advocates of early specialization also cite the “10,000-hour rule,” which indicates that it takes 10 years or 10,000 hours of practice to reach the highest level of performance in an activity. If an athlete starts intense, focused training before the age of 12, chances are, they'll hit that 10,000-hour mark much sooner than an athlete splitting their time between multiple endeavors.

Multisport Athletes: The case for playing many sports

Multisport athletes participate in a range of sports and activities as they are growing up. They have the opportunity to try different things, instead of committing to one sport and practicing it throughout the year. According to the NCAA survey of college athletes, the sports with the highest percent of multisport athletes were football, lacrosse and track.

- 71% of DI men's football players were multisport athletes.
- 88% of DI men and 83% of DI women who play lacrosse also played other sports.
- 87% of DI female runners and 91% of DI male runners were multisport athletes.

Being a multisport athlete has a lot of advantages—and some of them might surprise you.

Experience long-term success. While it might sound counterintuitive, multisport athletes tend to experience longer term success over their one-sport peers. More consistent performers with fewer injuries, multisport athletes also have a much higher chance of being active adults.

Limit overuse injuries. Overuse injuries occur when an athlete repeats the same motion over and over again. Playing multiple sports gives athletes time to heal and develop different muscle groups, tendons and ligaments. With the rise in overuse injuries in youth sports, this is an important point to remember.

Less pressure, less burnout. Burnout is a real problem for athletes who specialize too early. After all the practices, skills develop and games growing up, they get sick of their sport by the

time college comes around. Multisport athletes haven't had that intense emphasis on one sport and more likely to retain their love of the game.

Accumulate cross-sport skills. Multisport athletes gain different kinds of skills that they can apply from one sport to the next. This enhances hand-eye coordination, balance, endurance, explosion, communication and athletic agility. Who wouldn't want the speed of a sprinter with the hand-eye coordination of a baseball player on their team?

Should your athlete play one sport or multiple sports?

The obvious answer is: it depends. Take into consideration the sport your athlete hopes to achieve success in and their goals. Want to win that baseball Little League World championship? Consider specializing early. Excited about running track in college? There is no need to specialize.

There's a lot of pressure for families lean one way or the other. Use these data to make an informed decision that will help your student-athlete achieve their definition of sports success. You can also do your own research—talk to other parents and current college players. Ask prospective college coaches what they prefer to see from their recruits.