

Early specialization and year-round training is destroying youth hockey

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by [Josh Devine](#), 7 November 2013

Today's hockey culture is damaging youth hockey players' futures and putting the integrity of our game at risk. **Year-round training schedules for the youngest hockey players and the pressure to always do more is not only harming young skaters emotionally and academically, but also athletically.** Yet, we are constantly told the opposite. **Many have argued that early specialization in hockey is required to become elite. They couldn't be more wrong.**

Early specialization is when a player, prior to puberty, decides to completely focus his or her efforts on one sport and engages in high amounts of repetitious, monotonous, deliberate training regimens designed to maximize skill development. **The problem with early specialization in hockey and in many team sports, however, is that it is harmful at young ages, causing a host of problems and hindering athletic development.**

The first major problem with specializing in hockey too early is that practice makes permanent, not perfect. For example, Mite skaters have short attention spans, and this limits the amount of time they can focus and perform repetitions correctly.

Year-round training schedules also cause fatigue as young athletes aren't given proper rest and recovery periods. **As a result of the constant practice, many young players develop short, choppy and more upright strides.** Some parents have even asked me how their player could possibly seem to be getting worse at skating when they are doing skating clinics, AAA programs and off-ice training regimens all at the same time!

Finally, despite all the hysteria and pressure to start early, specialize early and train as much as is physically possible, the reality is that young athletes prior to puberty cannot achieve significant muscular gains.

One common argument for early specialization is that in sports like gymnastics and figure skating, athletes specialize early and are elite or well on their way to elite status at young ages. **This is an utter fallacy. In team sports like hockey, peak performance isn't reached until post puberty, whereas in gymnasts peak performance is always reached prior to puberty.**

Hockey is a game with an infinite amount of possibilities, movements, and patterns. It requires an athleticism far different than gymnastics or figure skating; foresight, creativity, patience and quick decision making are needed. Athletic skills can't be compartmentalized - skating, shooting, reading and reacting occur at the same split second. Contrast this with a gymnast's routine where the exercises are planned and moves are routine. Hockey is the exact opposite.

Only playing hockey at a young age versus participating in multiple sports limits the variety of motor skills a young player should learn. Like a child that learns two languages and can more easily pick up a third, **a young athlete that plays multiple sports and learns multiple movements will be better able to pick up new skills.** In addition, **playing multiple team sports introduces an athlete to varied game situations and helps improve an athlete's ability to read and react to the rest of the players in the game.**

The most unfortunate consequences of early specialization include the epidemic of overuse injuries and the psychological burnout that many players experience. Today, overuse injuries in sports have hit a record high. Many doctors attribute this to the increasing intensity of organized youth sports. Often, young athletes are getting hurt before they have a chance to fully develop physically. Many others are becoming so burnt out that they quit altogether. However, **the hidden cost of year-round hockey is the untold number of athletes still playing but without a passion for the game.**

We don't have to accept this state of affairs. Although time is running out, we can still restore sanity and integrity to the game of hockey. This will require families to start resisting the enormous pressure to always do more. Community associations, coaches, collegiate and professional hockey players, and many others will need to step up in order to change the tide. It's time to save our game.

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