

One-sport high school athletes prone to injury, burnout

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High school students who focus on one sport are more likely to get injured or suffer from burnout. But new research from the University of Georgia suggests their motivation for specializing in one sport is pure:

love of the game and competition.

Published in the *Orthopaedic Journal of Sports Medicine*, the study surveyed 975 high school athletes in the U.S. and found more than one in five reported a high level of [specialization](#) in one sport. More than 42% reported a small level of specialization.

"A number of studies have pointed out that if you specialize in one sport, for example you only play baseball or you only play football, you're doing the same movements over and over again, so there are a lot of issues with repetitive use injuries," said Dee Warmath, lead author of the study and an assistant professor in the College of Family and Consumer Sciences. "Other studies pointed out that there's also an association with burnout. You want [young adults](#) to be engaged in their sport, and there are a lot of benefits of that. But if all you do year-round is play soccer, there's a risk you'll get burned out and possibly leave the sport.

Experts often recommend limiting sport specialization, particularly among high school athletes. Prior to this study, little was known about the motivations causing high school athletes to specialize. Knowing what motivates your child to want to specialize in a sport can help parents and coaches figure out a playbook on getting the student to diversify.

"We might need a more balanced approach to dealing with sport specialization when athletes are engaging in it for what are really positive reasons," said Warmath, who is based in the Department of Financial Planning, Housing and Consumer Economics. "So instead of saying sport specialization is bad and you shouldn't do it, maybe it's more about finding ways to compete more effectively and emphasizing how even some [professional athletes](#) use other sports to train for their primary sport. This diversity of sports can make you better in your primary sport."

The key, Warmath said, is finding ways to communicate to athletes why specialization could have [negative consequences](#) and what they can do to avoid them.

Two types of competitiveness

The study examined the two characteristics of competitiveness: enjoyment of competition, which one might associate with love of the game or higher levels of good sportsmanship, and competitive contentiousness. Competitively contentious athletes are more likely to be competitive at all aspects of their life, which can manifest in more aggressive and contrarian attitudes.

The researchers found that athletes who planned to play a sport in college were significantly more likely to have a high level of specialization. Athletes who enjoyed competition were also more likely to specialize.

The athletes who engaged in a variety of sports were more likely to show characteristics of contrarians, such as challenging or arguing with other people even if that leads to conflict or hurt feelings. More athletic endeavors give them more opportunities to compete.

"It's like telling someone that they could have a [wreck](#) while driving, so they shouldn't drive because they won't have a wreck that way," Warmath said. "We need to recognize that athletes engage in sports specialization for what are really positive reasons: They want to get better at their sport. They want to compete more effectively."

More information: Dee Warmath et al, The Role of Athlete Competitiveness in High School Sport Specialization in the United States, *Orthopaedic Journal of Sports Medicine* (2022). [DOI: 10.1177/23259671221079670](#)

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