

TNT Dynamite Soccer Club – Notes from the DOC  
The Multi-Sport Athlete

Participating in multiple sports is a positive and healthy habit for a child, but like with all good things it must be performed in moderation. Far too often, the patterns of children operate within two extreme, opposite ends of the participation spectrum:

1. a young player concentrates solely on one sport at an early age, or
2. a young player participates in multiple sports within the same time frame or playing season (summer, fall, winter or spring).

Both of these scenarios can be unhealthy for players, as neither strike an appropriate balance for a young athlete. Below is an examination of several common situations young athletes (ages 8-13) are placed in, as well as the benefits and detriments in each one.

**Scenario #1: Soccer as a Sole Sport**

A passionate young soccer player may only want to play soccer – and they want to play it year-round. While this level of love for and commitment to an activity is admirable, it can also be harmful, as too much of any one sport can cause overuse injuries and mental burnout.

Overuse injuries in young athletes are common; they typically begin as slight injuries that merely discomfort a player (a nagging injury), but may become chronic because the player never allows time for the injury to properly heal. The constant repetition by the same muscle groups cause wear-and-tear without appropriate recovery. One of the most commonly recognized overuse injury in sports is tennis elbow.

According to Dr. Gary A. Levensgood, “Overuse injuries are responsible for almost 30% of the injuries in soccer and range from mild tendonitis (swelling of a tendon) all the way to a stress fracture.”

Repetition in one sport will help improve that skill and muscle group for competition, but it does little to improve overall fitness. Cross-training – varying the levels of stress placed on each muscle by conditioning different muscle groups – is healthy for all athletes in preventing overuse injuries and improving general fitness. This could occur through weight-room workouts, as well as in other sports (basketball, swimming, hockey, etc).

It’s also helpful for athletes in preventing mental burnout. Mental burnout occurs when the sport or activity they once were so passionate about is no longer fun and feels more like a job. Providing downtime to athletes is beneficial, because it helps recharge their passion, rests their bodies or soccer-specific muscles, and affords them the opportunity to try other activities.

**Scenario #2: Multiple Sports within the Same Season**

Many young athletes who enjoy participating in multiple sports often do so in the same season. This is most common during the spring season, where the available options – soccer, track, AAU basketball, travel volleyball, lacrosse, baseball and softball – are numerous.

While it can be healthy for players to pursue multiple sports – they are still developing their skills and interests – it is problematic for them to compete in multiple sports in the same season for the following reasons:

**Injuries:** Young players and their growing bodies are more susceptible to injuries. If they are playing multiple sports – going from a practice or game to another practice or game – there is a greater chance of injury as they continually tax their bodies without an appropriate time for recovery. Their performance in each sport is likely to suffer, as well.

**Commitment:** Given how time-consuming competitive sports has become, there is bound to be scheduling conflicts between two sports played in the same season. This places the player in the awkward situation of having to choose which event to attend. While it may be convenient for the player and their family to choose, the decision unfairly impacts the team and the players who have made a full commitment; inconsistent attendance at practices and games prevents the team from developing chemistry and synergy.

Players who choose to participate in multiple sports in the same season need to prioritize their commitment. It should not be games over practices (“if I have a baseball game and a soccer practice, I’ll go to the baseball game”) but should be one sport over the other. This approach ensures proper recovery time to prevent injuries, and teaches players how to prioritize their responsibilities. It’s critical that all parties involved – coaches, parents, and players – understand these priorities before any commitment is made. This may result in tough decisions being made – the opportunity to play at the highest competitive level may be lost – but ultimately this decision will benefit the player’s well-being.

### **Scenario #3: Multiple Sports throughout the Year**

The preferred scenario for a young athlete is to play multiple sports over the calendar year. This provides a more balanced approach to athletics; when one season in one sport ends, the season of another begins (overlap between seasons is commonplace and is easily handled based on the priority system described in Scenario #2).

The player receives numerous benefits from this approach:

1. they become more well-rounded athletes by working different muscle groups and resting those that would be overworked by playing only one sport;
2. they can better determine which sport they most enjoy before making a larger commitment to it in later years;
3. they mentally and emotionally recharge with each sport, keeping each experience enjoyable.

Summation: Athletes benefit from playing multiple sports at young ages, but are encouraged to do so over the course of the year and not concurrently in the same season. Recovery time and cross-training are critical elements that must be considered.