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Specialization in High School Sports

By Verlan Nikkel

In former days, kids who loved sports looked forward to high school when they could participate in organized athletics. Those of us from previous generations had to make our own entertainment and sports were the easiest way to stay entertained. Activities included Sunday afternoon neighborhood softball games; we would spend the whole afternoon playing until it was time to clean up and head off to Sunday night church services.

In those days, we looked forward to participating in the sports our school had to offer. We stayed busy each season playing some type of sport – if not as an actual participant, perhaps as the team manager. There was a desire to be around whatever was going on. Oh, how times have changed.



In today's society, it appears the excitement of being involved on a team and not worrying about determining who the main players are has disappeared. In our day, those players who were not starters tried to be the best practice players possible. We took pride in our role on the team. In today's athletes, it's rare to find that level of dedication to the team.

Today, as athletic director at my high school alma mater, we have a student population of about 270 students in grades 9-12. We offer nine sports for both boys and girls. More and more student-athletes are choosing either one or two sports and focusing solely on those sports. As a result, our participation numbers are way down in several sports.

One could argue that we have too many sports for a school our size. Perhaps that is true to an extent, but a bigger problem is that more and more athletes are being selective with their participation in sports. Forty years ago, three- and four-sport athletes were common. Today, three- and four-sport athletes are a rarity – at least in our school. For this reason, some of our sports are hurting for numbers.

Today's society focuses on being an individual – “Do what is best for ME seems to be the slogan.” Parents are starting to support this concept as well. If their son or daughter isn't going to get to play a lot, they support them quitting even if it leaves the team at a disadvantage for practice numbers. Why is this happening?

Kids today have many more entertainment options. Forty years ago, we had to find our own fun. Television was only allowed to be watched on Saturday nights and maybe Sunday afternoon if there was a football game. Sometimes we could watch a special program on television.

Today, kids have numerous entertainment possibilities. For example, they can stay at home or go to a movie theater to watch movies. If they want to talk to their friends, they have Internet, cell phones, texting and more. Many kids drive sooner today. Our churches offer more service opportunities than 20 years ago. Jobs take time away from students if they feel that is important to them. This is especially true in Iowa with summer school baseball and softball teams. No wonder high school students today specialize in cocurricular activities offered by schools.

Another area that has helped fuel the concept of sport specialization is the whole AAU system, which has evolved into a major business. There are teams for literally any age you want. These out-of-school programs have fueled the idea of focusing on one sport.

The pitch for the AAU teams is, “put in the time with us and we can get you a college scholarship.” If kids play another sport, it takes time away from becoming more proficient in the other sport. Granted, a college scholarship is nice, but there are a limited number of athletic scholarships available. There are many more academic scholarships that allow students to attend college at reduced rates and achieve the same goals.

Parents are also affected by the AAU emphasis. Parents invest so much money, time, travel and training that when their son or daughter gets to high school, the parents expect a pay off in terms of playing time. When that doesn't happen, the high school coaches get the blame. When reality sets in and the student is not getting the playing time expected, many times he or she either transfers to another school or focuses on something else and quits the team. Parents forget that the other parents have invested the same thing, and suddenly we are back to where we started. No one has a decided advantage.

Is specialization in one sport good for high school athletes? Opinions vary, but playing several sports rather than specializing seems to have more positive benefits. In larger schools it happens, but a great athlete can still have an impact on any sport in which he or she participates. In smaller schools, good athletes are needed to help make the teams better.

So what if a player isn't the star of the basketball team but is on the baseball team? The basketball team needs the

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player to help make that team better, and the baseball team can do the same for the player. It should be all about school and friendships – not about the individual.

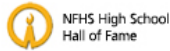
In today's society, the "me" mentality is winning over the team mentality. Small schools will continue to struggle with numbers, which will lead to the cutting of programs, which in turn leads to taking away opportunities for some student-athletes to use the talents they have in a sport they love.

About the Author: Verlan Nikkel is athletic director at Pella Christian High School in Pella, Iowa.



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