

encouraging players to be multi-sport athletes

Playing multiple sports in high school makes for well-rounded and healthy athletes who love what they do and dominate on the field. While parents might feel that outright specialization could mean better developed skills in front of talent scouts, the benefits of multi-sport athletes far outweigh the increased risks that come from year-long practice of just one sport. What *will* maximize an athlete's potential in a single sport is having an end goal in mind, and planning a high school playing career around their ideal sport of choice.

specializing in one sport

The idea that specializing early in high school will translate into semi-professional skills doesn't always hold up in the real world of professional sports: of the 31 members in this year's NFL Draft, 28 had [played sports other than football](#) during their high school years. 58% of them played basketball. Track and field came in close second, followed by baseball, wrestling, and lacrosse.

The overlapping skill sets among sports helps younger multi-sport athletes to work on other abilities while they build their athletic strength: communication skills, reading body language, muscle tone and agility, to name a few. Plus, using off-season time to compete instead of training means more experience on the field of play, and makes for a seasoned future captain of the team.

For example, in baseball, players need to have the quick skills to steal bases, as well as the coordination to make catches at difficult angles. Similarly, wide receivers need the quick foot skills to dart past their marks and dive for tough-to-catch passes.

Defending basketball players use lateral movement to block passes and harass the opposing team, just like linebackers move back and forth in pass defense. And, track runners sprinting the 100m dash work on the same muscle groups that safeties need to catch runaway receivers heading towards the end zone.

put your high school athlete's career in context

That being said, even the NFL Draft picks we mentioned earlier probably had a goal in mind: playing one sport at the professional level. Help to make players' high school careers a fun and varying journey, with a concrete destination in mind.

Football players might consider basketball or track and field, based on the real-world examples of the 2016 NFL Draft Picks. Baseball players might consider lacrosse or football, sports that will keep their muscle weight up while working on stamina and agility.

Basketball players might think about football or track and field: football can add some muscle to body up against defenders in the paint, and events like the high jump or long jump in track and field will add some height to their rebound game.

keep players healthy

Part of the argument against year-long training for one sport focuses on repetitive strain on the same muscle groups. Wear on those muscle groups happens naturally throughout the season. If anything, keeping *some* training going in the off-season will keep those muscles from losing strength as the regular season comes back. Particularly, exercises that focus on form (like soccer footwork or basketball shooting) are great to be working on all year.

But, by using their bodies differently and reducing exercises that require strength and strain on similar muscles over and over (the best example might be baseball pitchers), multi-sport athletes can prevent injury from overuse. Instead, they can be building general strength and endurance.

love for the sport

“You gotta have fun. Regardless of how you look at it, we’re playing a game. It’s a business, it’s our job, but I don’t think you can do well unless you’re having fun.”

– Derek Jeter, New York Yankees

Just like repetitive strain can cause physical injury, relentless competition and pressure while playing a single sport can end up with a high school player burning out and losing interest. If you’ve helped a player develop a long-term goal for his/her ideal sport, make them strive to be the best at that sport.

But, create opportunities for that athlete to blow off some steam and change up the usual routine. That might mean joining another organized school athletic team and programming in some extra workouts to keep their goal sport in check, or just encouraging players to jump into church softball leagues or other community activities that give them a break from their regular training.

how to encourage multi-sport athletes

As an athletic director, tackle the issue from multiple fronts. Take a department-wide approach and talk to your coaches about inter-sport collaboration, so that your staff can plan in advance for some players to preview practices for one team or another as sport seasons transition from fall to spring.

Then, create incentive programs that celebrate students who play multiple sports: multi-sport athletes might receive a special varsity letter or piece of apparel that makes them stand out.

As a parent, also tackle the issue from multiple fronts! Talk to your child about their future in athletics and help them to narrow down their preferred sport, and go from there to plan out a tentative high school (career) athletic schedule. Reach out to training professionals in the community and put together an exercise regimen focusing on form that is safe to work on year-round, while looking for alternative sports or camps for your child to join.

And, be sure to establish a healthy line of communication with your child's teachers: college athletic scholarships have [strict academic guidelines](#) put together by the NCAA, and you'll need to be proactive in helping your child navigate both sports and school responsibilities.