

Parentally Speaking April 2007

Can kids who don't play travel baseball develop into good players, and is it fair for coaches of travel teams to expect their players to concentrate only on that one sport – or to make that sport the top priority – throughout the year?

As I've stated here many times before, we recommend that young athletes not specialize in one sport until they are old enough to make that kind of a decision on their own. Playing multiple sports promotes overall athleticism, which is never going to be detrimental to a player's development in one particular sport. So, I do believe that young athletes who do not play travel baseball can develop into fine players. If you find that your child's participation in baseball at the recreational or in-house level isn't helping him or her progress adequately, there are plenty of coaches out there who can work with him or her one-on-one at times that fit into your family's schedule.

Many travel team coaches ask young athletes and their families to make huge time and financial commitments to their teams. Because of financial constraints, as well as busy family schedules, this commitment may prove to be too much. Ultimately, if a child hopes to play baseball or any other sport seriously into high school and beyond, he or she will be at a disadvantage without having faced tougher competition. Individual lessons with a qualified coach can help bridge that gap somewhat, but not completely.

If you find yourself in a situation where a coach is placing significant demands on your child, I would ask the kid directly which sport he or she likes better and which one he or she wants to pursue more seriously. On one hand, if the child wants to make a serious commitment to a particular sport and has fun playing other sports at a less-intense level, I would say that you should let that scenario play out. On the other hand, if he or she wants to play several sports at a less-intense level, that's okay, too, since the child will be developing a wide range of athletic skills. And, if your child would like to pursue two different sports at a more-competitive level, I would recommend getting all parties – parents, athlete and both coaches – into a room for a meeting to see if some kind of compromise can be reached that would allow that to happen.

If it's just too difficult for your child to participate in two sports at the travel level, look for a

good recreational or in-house program in the sport he or she isn't playing at the higher level and try to find other options that fit into your schedule to further his or experiences in that activity (indoor soccer, one-one-one pitching lessons, summer camps, after-school programs, etc.).

In some areas, middle-school aged athletes are permitted to try out for and play on varsity high school athletic teams. What are your feelings about this?

Every young athlete matures physically and emotionally at his or her own rate. There may be some sixth graders (about 12 years old) who are physically strong enough to compete with freshmen (usually ninth graders who are about 15 years old), but who aren't ready from a mental or emotional standpoint for the pressure of competing at that level. Likewise, there might be some sixth graders who are emotionally stable and really understand the game, but can't compete physically.

This decision really has to be handled on a case by case basis. If the athlete is going to try to play against the older kids, the parent and coach shoulder a tremendous responsibility. They must monitor the situation and make certain that the kid is holding up from a physical and an emotional standpoint.

The games get serious enough fast enough. A sixth grader has a lot of years in which to compete. There's no sense rushing it and risking a bad experience that will make the kid want to quit playing altogether.

What are your opinion about products such as weighted baseballs that are supposed to help make a players arm stronger?

I've never been a big believer in using any type of weighted equipment to build strength for baseball (I'm not referring to resistance training, but instead items such as weighted bats, balls, etc.). I'm a big believer in training with the same objects that you use on the field. I never used any kind of weight on my bat when preparing to hit, and I never threw a weighted ball. In fact, I can't recall ever seeing any type of weighted balls being used for training purposes at the big league level.

It seems to me that if you train with a weighted object, such as a ball or a bat, that is similar

to what you use in a game situation, you may in fact be teaching your muscles to react and move more slowly than if you just use a regulation game ball or game bat. Additionally, the shoulder and elbow are very delicate areas, and there is no telling what type of long-term shoulder or elbow damage might result from throwing a heavier ball.

There's no better way to build arm strength than by throwing. Play catch and long toss to the point of fatigue and then follow that up with a rotator cuff maintenance program to keep the shoulder muscles strong and free of injury. A local fitness professional, such as a certified strength and conditioning coach, a certified athletic trainer or a certified personal trainer, can provide you with a safe and effective rotator cuff program.

By Cal Ripken, Jr.