

Specialization vs. Multi-Sport Training: What's Best?

When it comes to training young athletes, a jack of all trades can beat a king
by John Rowbothan



Illustration by Matt A. Gouig

Sarah Cardinal is the 2004 Female High School Athlete of the Year, and one of the nation's best high school throwers. Her personal best are as follows: Shotput, 43 feet 1-3/4 inches; Discus, 150 feet 8 inches; Hammer Throw, 152 feet 4 inches.



Photo by Bill Schaefer,
Idaho State Journal

In a sport where most champions hit their peak in their 20s, Naim Suleymanoglu broke his first world record in weightlifting when he was just 15 years old. Soccer prodigy Freddy Adu was earning a half million dollars a year when he was 14. Women's tennis and women's golf is flooded with teenagers eager to become the next Maria Sharapova or Michelle Wie. And who would have predicted LeBron James' spectacular success in the NBA as a teenager? Sports, it seems, is being invaded by youth. But such success, if it involves early specialization, has a price.

In an effort to achieve the highest levels in sport, athletes are specializing in sports at younger and younger ages. And while the aforementioned athletes might never have become as successful as they are had they been multi-sport athletes, the average athlete who tries to emulate them by focusing on one sport often ends up quitting sports altogether. In fact, studies have shown that approximately 70 percent of athletes will quit organized sports by the age of 13!

At BFS we believe that most high school athletes should play multiple sports, and there are many reasons for this I'd like to share with you.

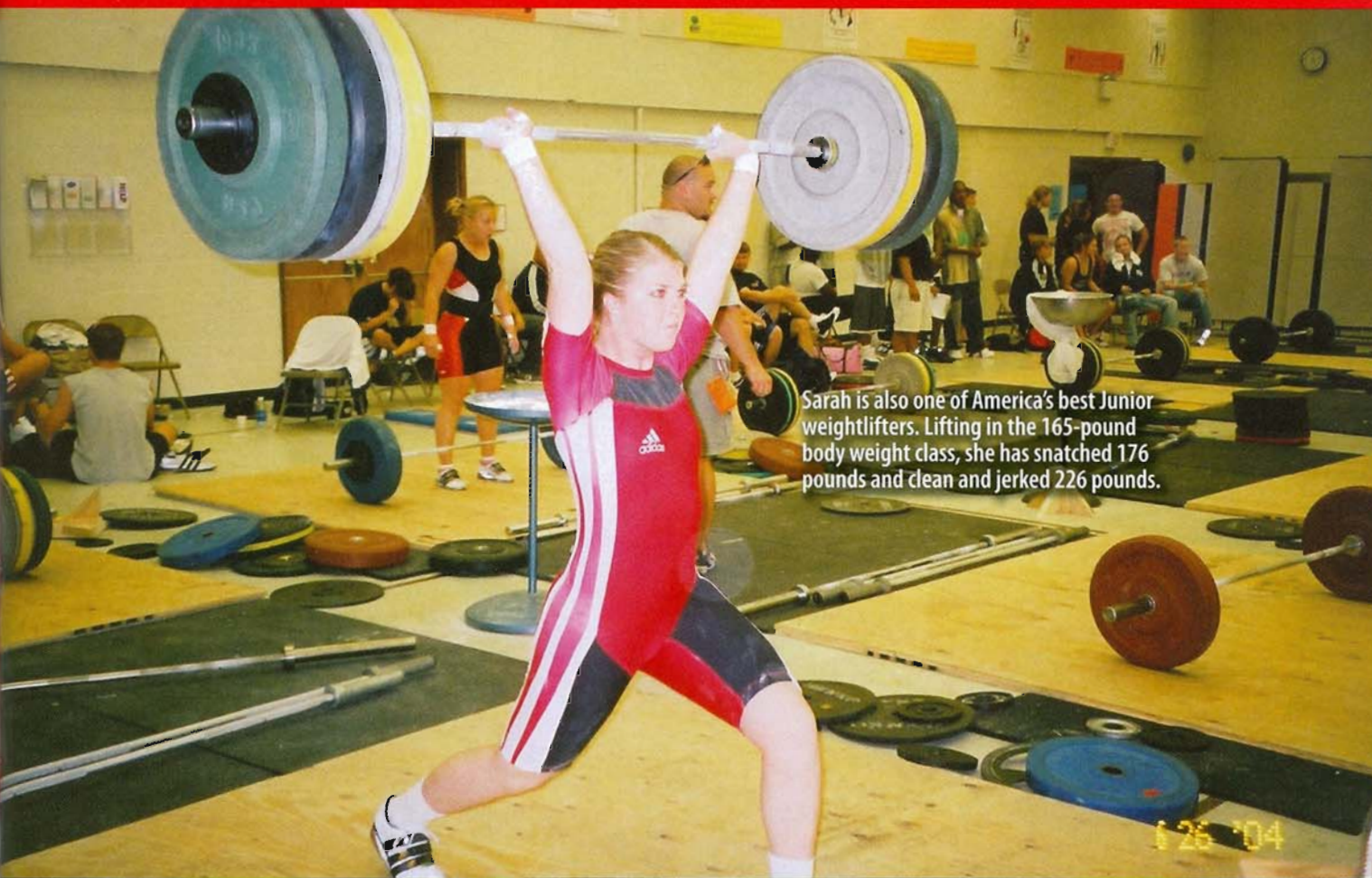
Diversifying the Athletic Portfolio

Most young kids do not know what sport they will be best at eventually. An athlete who matures early might have an advantage in youth football because of his size; but as his peers mature over time and begin to equal or exceed him in size, he might discover he has more natural talent for wrestling. Perhaps the tall, lanky girl who was put in basketball because of her height would be better off in volleyball or a track and field event. A figure skater trained by BFS Editor Kim Goss found she had more natural talent in ice dancing, and still later found that she was most gifted in ballroom dancing. Had she stuck with figure skating, Kim has little doubt she would have abandoned sports completely.

Of course, there are natural athletes who can

seemingly excel in any sport. Dylan Russ, our 2005 High School Male Athlete of the Year, decided to accept a college scholarship for football, but he could have played at the Division I level in wrestling. In fact, he intentionally chose a college without a wrestling program because he thought it best to avoid the temptation of trying out for the wrestling team also. But physical phenoms such as Dylan Russ are rare exceptions to the multi-sport rule that seems to hold for our kids: It is only by trying several sports over several years that young athletes will find out which sport best suits their natural athletic gifts.

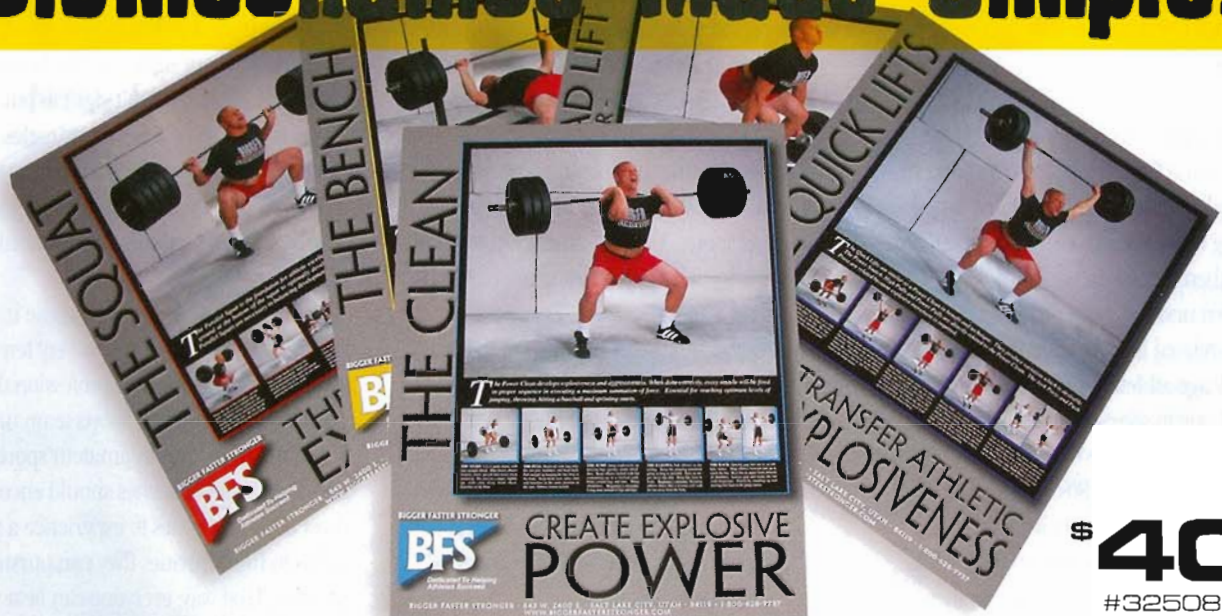
Injuries are another issue. Al Vermeil, a professional strength coach who has earned world champion rings in both football and basketball, says he is alarmed at the ever-increasing number of sports medicine clinics being established in this country. What is causing the rise in injuries that gives rise to the need for these clinics? Coach Vermeil believes one of the factors is the misguided



Sarah is also one of America's best Junior weightlifters. Lifting in the 165-pound body weight class, she has snatched 176 pounds and clean and jerked 226 pounds.

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Multi-sport athlete Dylan Rush was our 2005 BFS Male High School Athlete of the Year. Here he is shown being presented the award by Coach Todd Brown (left) and his father, Greg Rush.

Photo by Aaron N. Nagata

tendency to encourage kids to concentrate on one sport at too early an age. And he's right.

According to a study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, from 1997 to 1999 the highest rates of sports-related injuries were among kids ages 5 to 14. And it's gotten worse since then. Each year an estimated 3.5 million children under the age of 15 are treated for sports-related injuries, and 20 percent of school-age athletes miss at least one day of school due to sports-related injuries!

In the 70s and early 80s, millions of Americans were training with the goal of competing in a 26-mile marathon. As the number of chronic injuries to these athletes skyrocketed, many runners turned to triathlons, because dividing their training

among three events (running, biking and swimming) reduced the associated training risks compared to focusing on just running.

Another advantage of multi-sport training is that it elevates the overall performance in other sports. The best athletes in football may go on to help the basketball, baseball, wrestling and track teams. Because BFS stresses the benefits of multi-sport training, after our clinics we find that not only does the football team do better but also that all sports—both men's and women's—benefit. Also, because these athletes play other sports, their teammates from other sports will often come out to support them at games. Everybody gets along.

Finally, multi-sport athletes are often

healthier from a psychological standpoint, as coaches do not fight over the best athletes in the school. It just isn't right to put athletes in the center of these power struggles, as the extra pressure takes the fun out of sports and may even be responsible for causing athletes to give up sports entirely. Sports should be fun.

With over 30 million young people involved in organized sports, let's face it: Very few of our kids will wind up playing professional sports, playing on a Division I sports team or making it to a national level in amateur sports. That's why high school coaches should encourage most of their athletes to experience a variety of sports to find activities they can pursue for a lifetime. That way, everyone can be a winner.

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