



Specialization or Sampling?

What High School ADs Are Saying About the Future of Student-Athletes

By Branden M. Lippy, Ed.D, CMAA

Are high school athletes better off focusing on one sport year-round or diversifying their experiences through multi-sport participation?

That question continues to be the center of ongoing conversations among high school athletic directors, coaches, and parents across the country. In a recent study conducted across Pennsylvania Interscholastic Athletic Association (PIAA) District III, 30 athletic directors weighed in. Their collective insight: the disadvantages of sport specialization outweigh the benefits.

The Study

The ADs who were surveyed come from both public and non-public schools, gathering data through online questionnaires, one-on-one interviews, and reviews of athletic department materials such as coaching handbooks and school board policies. The goal was simple: understand how ADs perceive sport specialization and its impact on student-athletes.

Three primary questions guided the research:

1. What are the perceived advantages of sport specialization?
2. What are the perceived disadvantages?
3. Does sport specialization improve opportunities for collegiate athletics?

What the Data Revealed

The disadvantages stand out.

Over 80% of athletic directors reported that high school athletes are specializing in one sport, often at the expense of others. A striking 87% of ADs noted that student-athletes are quitting one sport to focus solely on another, usually driven by pressure rather than personal desire.

Across both surveys and interviews, ADs consistently cited:

- Overuse injuries

- Burnout
- Lost opportunities for personal growth
- Narrow athletic development

Most ADs strongly disagreed with the idea that early specialization leads to better performance or increased chances at college recruitment. In fact, many felt it hindered student-athletes in the long run by limiting skill development and enjoyment.

Who is Driving Specialization?

The biggest influencers, according to the ADs? Parents and guardians. Every single surveyed athletic director said family members exert the most pressure to specialize. Coaches came next, followed by peer influence. The perceived pathway to a scholarship – or even a professional career – continues to drive early, intense training in a single sport, despite evidence to the contrary.

Are There Any Benefits?

While most ADs acknowledged that year-round focus may help refine skills in a single sport, only a small number viewed it as significantly beneficial. None believed the benefits of specialization outweighed its risks.

Interestingly, many ADs expressed concern that club sports and travel teams are diverting students away from school-based programs. With limited time and energy, student-athletes often feel forced to choose between a club commitment and a school team and usually opt for the club, thinking it boosts their exposure.

What ADs Recommend:

Action Steps for School Leaders

Despite holding strong opinions against specialization, most districts do not have formal policies or public-facing materials addressing the issue. The study revealed minimal written guidance in coaching handbooks, school board policies, or athletic department statements.

Athletic Directors Can Lead the Charge By:

1. Promoting the multi-sport philosophy

The overwhelming majority (97%) of ADs agreed that playing multiple sports enhances the high school experience. Participation builds resilience, leadership, and team chemistry across seasons and helps students avoid burnout and overuse injuries.

2. Educating Stakeholders

Coaches, parents, and even students need more clarity. Regular communication through parent meetings, school newsletters, and team handbooks should explain the physical, mental, and emotional impacts of specialization.

“We can’t just talk about education-based athletics. We have to model it,” said one participating AD.

3. Aligning with National Trends

The NFHS and the NIAAA both promote education-based athletics and multi-sport participation. Athletic departments should reference these organizations and build internal messaging that reinforces these values.

4. Updating Handbooks and Policies

The study found that even in districts with ADs strongly against specialization, written policies were lacking. Creating or revising athletic department documents to reflect a balanced philosophy is a practical next step.

Looking Ahead

The culture of youth sports is unlikely to shift overnight. But high school athletic directors are in a unique position to influence local communities by shaping expectations, building collaborative relationships with coaches and parents, and making sure student-athletes understand the full picture.

As one AD said, “High school sports should be an extension of the classroom, not a pipeline to the pros.”

For those in leadership positions, the priority remains clear: help student-athletes become well-rounded individuals; not just winners on the scoreboard.

Quick Takeaways for ADs:

- 97% of ADs say multi-sport participation is ideal
- 87% report that student-athletes are quitting one sport to focus on another
- 0% believe specialization offers more benefits than disadvantages
- Parents/guardians are the top source of pressure to specialize
- Most districts lack formal guidance on the issue and it’s time to fill the gap **IAA**

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