

ISYS Update

Threats to Educational Athletics

For the last two years, our staff at the Institute for the Study of Youth Sports (ISYS) has been conducting numerous focus group interviews with many of the key stakeholders in Michigan high school sports. With the help of the MHSAA we interviewed student-athletes, coaches, athletic directors, parents of athletes and principals. Our purpose in conducting these interviews was to identify critical issues and challenges encountered in school sports programs. Believing in the many benefits of educational athletics (many of which are being verified in current youth development research) we wanted to identify concerns. For example, some have argued that youth sports are becoming more professionalized with a greater emphasis on winning, scholarships, sports specialization, and declining sportsmanship. We wanted to see if this was the case. If so, we can work with the MHSAA to meet these challenges and ensure that scholastic sports benefits outweigh any costs.



INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF
YOUTH SPORTS

Daniel Gould, Ph.D.
Professor and Director
Institute for the Study of Youth Sports
Michigan State University

letes for out-of-school teams; the attitude that it is more acceptable to specialize held by younger coaches; pressure to keep up with athletes who specialize; and a lack of understanding of the value of cross-training. In terms of ramifications of specialization, the following were cited: problems getting enough athletes to form teams in all sports, athletes missing practices because of simultaneous sport commitments, and having athletes recruited out of other sports to focus on one.

Inappropriate attitudes and expectations. Many of the thoughts comprising this category focused on attitudes deemed inappropriate, but according to the respondents were those that characterize many young scholastic athletes today. These themes included such things as a lack of appreciation for the opportunity to participate, selfishness and a sense of entitlement, and the notion that one's rival competitor is an enemy.

Unhealthy parental involvement. One of the most frequently discussed topics was parental issues. A wide range of sub-themes made up this overall category; some focused on inappropriate involvement (trying to coach their child when untrained as a coach) and failing to understand one's role as a sport parent, while others focused on unrealistic expectations placed on athletes and an emphasis placed on earning college athletic scholarships (even in cases when the child did not have the requisite talent).

Overemphasized outcome and focus on winning. This category included sentiments that **parents and coaches overemphasize winning.** In addition, a shift towards an extrinsic motivation orientation was noted, with sub-themes centered around an increased focus on extrinsic rewards such as focusing on college scholarships or notoriety that can come from athletic success and the effects extrinsic rewards can have on an educational athletics focus.

Financial problems. All five participant groups mentioned financial issues as being a concern for high school sports. These themes all centered around high school sport funding issues and the problems inadequate funding can cause. The

sure to succeed placed on athletes, and coaches pressures to perform at practice.

Single-sport and early sport specialization.

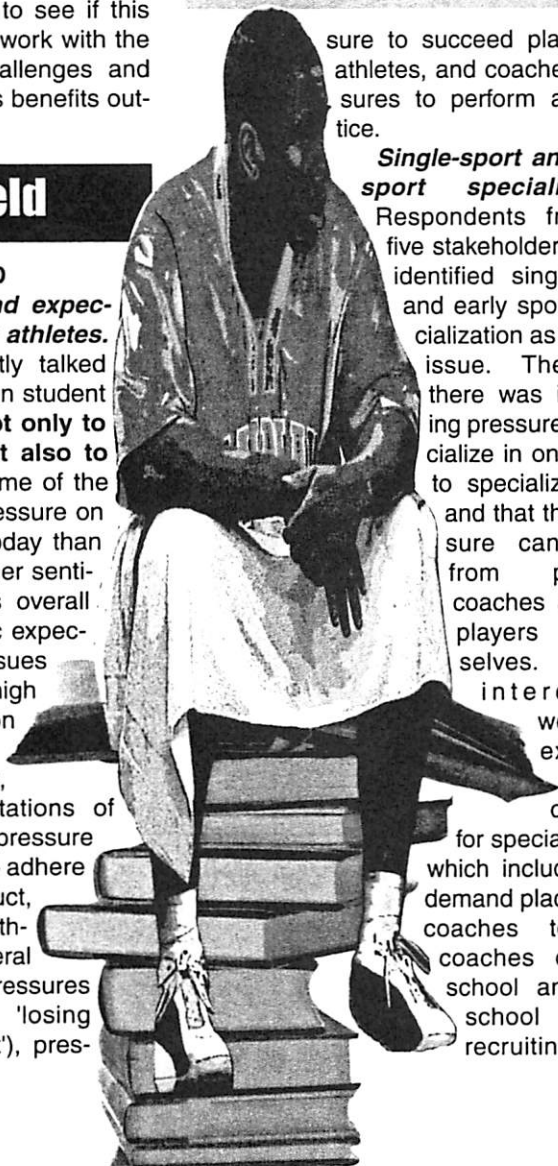
Respondents from all five stakeholder groups identified single-sport and early sports specialization as a major issue. They felt there was increasing pressure to specialize in one sport, to specialize early and that this pressure can come from parents, coaches and the players themselves. Most interesting were the explanations offered for specialization, which included: the demand placed on coaches to win; coaches of both school and non-school sports recruiting ath-

Voices from the Field

WHAT WE FOUND

Increased pressure and expectations placed on student athletes.

Those interviewed frequently talked about the pressure placed on student athletes today; **pressure not only to perform well and win, but also to produce academically.** Some of the respondents felt that the pressure on students is much greater today than in previous generations. Other sentiments identified within this overall category included academic expectations comprised of such issues as pressure to maintain a high GPA and score well on achievement tests, parental pressure placed on athletes, parents' unrealistic expectations of their child's athletic talent, pressure caused by athletes having to adhere to higher standards of conduct, people looking to penalize athletes more often than general students, the impact of pressures placed on athletes (e.g., 'losing one's passion for the sport'), pres-



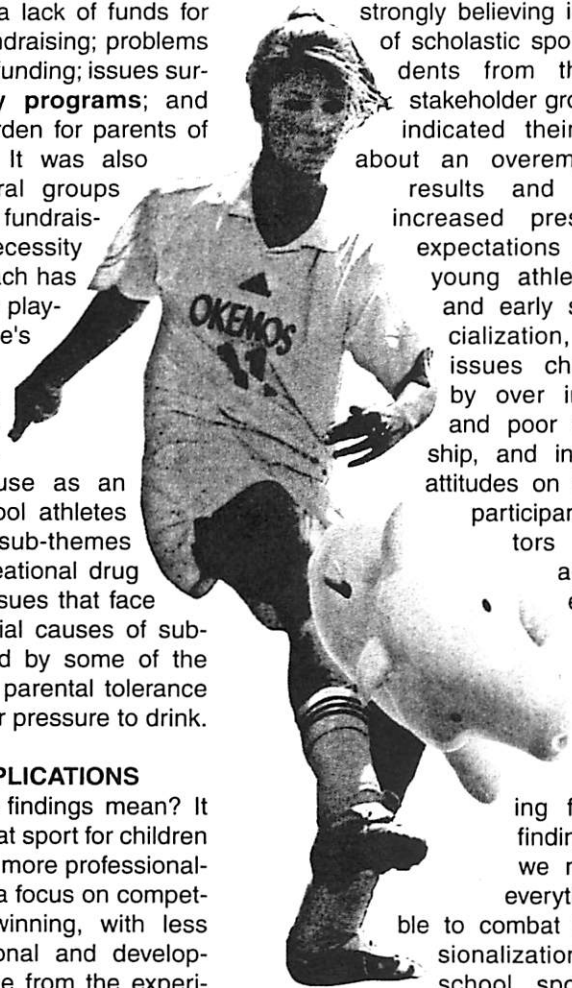
sub-themes included: a lack of funds for programs; need for fundraising; problems caused by inadequate funding; issues surrounding **pay-for-play programs**; and increased financial burden for parents of high school athletes. It was also interesting that several groups mentioned the need for fundraising and how this necessity reduces the time a coach has to work with his or her players and spend with one's family.

Substance abuse.

Four of the five participant groups mentioned substance abuse as an issue facing high school athletes today. Many of the sub-themes reported alcohol, recreational drug and tobacco use as issues that face young athletes. Potential causes of substance abuse identified by some of the focus groups included parental tolerance of alcohol use and peer pressure to drink.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

So, what do these findings mean? It has been suggested that sport for children and youth is becoming more professionalized, characterized by a focus on competitive outcomes and winning, with less emphasis on educational and developmental gains that come from the experience. In addition, the professionalized model focuses on intense training, single and early sport specialization, and year-round training. Results from our study lend support to these observations. While still

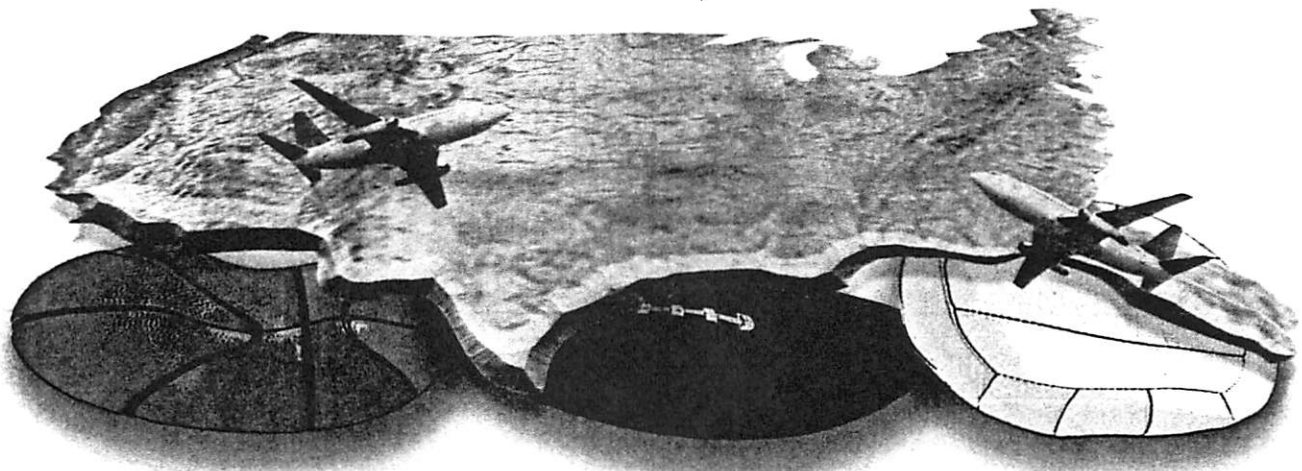


strongly believing in the value of scholastic sports, respondents from the various stakeholder groups clearly indicated their concerns about an overemphasis on results and outcomes, increased pressure and expectations placed on young athletes, single and early sports specialization, parental issues characterized by over involvement and poor sportsmanship, and inappropriate attitudes on the part of participants, all factors that work against the educational athletics model.

The biggest implication coming from these findings is that we need to do everything possible to combat the professionalization of high school sports. While some change can be carried out by the MHSAA's policies and the programs this organization develops (e.g., sportsmanship efforts, Coaching Advancement Program), the changes of greatest impact

will have to come from the local school level. A good place to start is to emphasize parent and coaches education by discussing the issues identified in this article to help form relevant and meaningful policies and programs. Many of the effects that spawn from a professionalized focus in youth sport subtly creep into programs. Therefore, to maintain a personal and program-wide educational perspective it is important to have your program philosophy well-thought out and repeatedly emphasized (versus merely having it written down somewhere, but seldom reading or conveying your perspective to program stakeholders; or waiting for a problem to occur before reacting). At the ISYS we will also do our part. We are currently developing a high school sport parent education program, have a study on sports specialization in progress and are assisting the MHSAA in developing the curriculum for their Captain's Leadership Training Conferences.

Finally, many forces are leading to the professionalization of youth sports (e.g., **high school national team rankings**, the success of athletes who started at early ages like Tiger Woods and the Williams sisters, greater availability of year-round sport opportunities and private coaching). However, just because our society emphasizes a professionalized focus, adopting this approach is not necessarily in the best interest of young people. As Jack Roberts often says, it is imperative that we all work to keep educational athletics educational.



Pressures to balance athletics and academics; the No. 1 syndrome; pay-for-play, and national championships and related travel all threaten to take the air out of school sports, according to study groups.