

Are You A Gold-Medal Parent?

An Interview with Gary Hall, Jr.

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Should your child sample a variety of sports or specialize early to focus on a single sport, as he or she matures and develops athletically? While there is no single “path to the podium”, success is ultimately defined by a child’s continued participation in and enjoyment from a chosen sport or other healthy activity. For many kids, the physical, emotional, and motor skill capacities to justify specializing in a single sport are not fully developed until late adolescence. Numerous Olympians and other successful athletes recognize the importance that parental encouragement (not pressure) played in their success. Accordingly, parents should consistently emphasize their unwavering and unconditional support for and love in watching their children play and reinforce this commitment by taking the NYSHSI Parent Pledge.

Sport Specialization

What is the ideal age for your child to specialize in a specific sport? This is a very challenging question to answer – even for professionals, as there is limited and conflicting scientific evidence supporting any response. There are certainly many examples of elite athletes who “specialized early” and numerous others who played many different sports early on and then “specialized later”. Much depends on the sport and the individual. A position stand published by the International Society for Sport Psychology (Cote´ et al. 2009) cites several guiding tenets that are associated with successful continued sport participation *and* achievement of elite performance:

- Early exposure to a variety of sports does not hinder successful participation or elite athletic development in sports where peak performance is reached after maturation. However, there are notable exceptions where peak performance is achieved earlier (e.g., gymnastics and figure skating).
- Early exposure to a variety of sports is linked to a longer sport career and a longer-term involvement in sports overall. The reasons include a lower risk of physical injuries and psychological burn-out.
- Youth athletic and psycho-social development is positively influenced by appropriate and progressive exposure to different sport environments and a variety of physical activities.

- Non-structured play can establish a range of important cognitive and motor skill development attributes that may lead the child to better determine his or her principal sport of interest, as well as athletic success later on.
- At early adolescence (from age 13 on), a child might then choose to specialize in a favorite sport or continue in one or more sports competitively or at a recreational level.
- Late adolescents (at least 16 years old) have the physical, cognitive, social, emotional and motor skills needed to invest their effort into highly specialized training in one sport.

An Olympian’s Viewpoint

The following interview with Olympic Hall of Fame Inductee Gary Hall, Jr. presents a personal case history and perspective that illustrates these tenets on specialization, as well as the important role a parent plays. Notably, Gary and his Dad, Gary Hall, Sr., are the only father-son duo to both compete and medal in three different Olympic Games.

Gary, what sport(s) did you participate in as a youth and at what age(s)?

From ages 6-12, I played a variety of sports seasonally – T ball, youth soccer, flag football, basketball, cross-country running, skateboarding, skiing, snowboarding; and I even got involved with high and long jump in high school. Swimming became my primary sport at the age of 13, except for my senior year in high school, when I participated in track (after obtaining a college scholarship in swimming).

What drew you to these sports?

Primarily the social aspects... all the other kids I knew were active. With swimming, I got to hang out with girls in bathing suits after school!

Did you ever feel “pressure” to follow in your father’s footsteps (as a three-time Olympian and medalist) to pursue the same sport?

At 13, my father “forced” me to swim. I was conscientious of others’ expectations from within the sport; but I was reluctant to be a swimmer, due to those expectations. It was a lot of pressure. Fortunately, those expectations and pressure weren’t coming from my father. He just wanted all of his kids to be involved in sport. I could never have been successful, if that pressure was coming from my father.



Given the likelihood that kids might gravitate to sports their parents did, do you have any recommendations for parents?

Witnessing over the years the different approaches that various parents took with their kids, and the long-term results of those approaches, gives me this healthy perspective: Be supportive! The athlete who has fun wins...not the athlete who wins has fun.

My daughter is seven years old. She’s just beginning to get the concept of winning and losing. After one of her soccer games she said, “We lost!” I asked her if she had fun and she said she did. I told her that I don’t think having fun is “losing.” It is winning. In fact, being healthy and having fun is much more important than winning. By promoting health and fun, parents enable their children to excel as athletes... and win.

What are your fondest memories related to your sport as a teenager?

Towel snapping in the locker room.

Do you remember at what age you had an injury related to your sport? And what was it?

I never had a surgery, spent time on crutches, or sustained any other type of injury that prevented me from training or participating in competition. In fact, my only real injury was from skateboarding at age 12 (knocking out a tooth and resulting in a trip to the emergency room)! Not until age 33 did I have a knee injury; and even that healed with rest.

That is a remarkable record of staying “injury-free” as a youth athlete, Gary! What do you attribute that to?

Intuitively, I always listened to my body. Your body tells you when to back off. I listened, and endured real torment from teammates

and coaches throughout my career, as a result. At twenty, I had a coach I’d never met before approach me on the pool deck to jab his finger in my chest and scream at me for being so lazy! I had the courage (or maybe it was defiance) to stand up to that criticism, listen to my body and follow what I believed to be the right training approach. As athletes, we’re conditioned to push through pain. If you listen to your body, you can differentiate between fatigue and injury. Both are painful. Push through fatigue – not injury.

Now as a Dad, what message would you give fellow parents?

Allow me to start by disclosing that I am NOT of the belief that everyone is equal or that there are no winners or losers. Sport teaches us how to lose, as well as the constant pursuit to be better. These are important things. It’s why I want my kids involved in sport. Encourage your kids to participate in sport and, most importantly, to have fun! You can’t force a competitive nature on a kid. If you try, it’ll be frustrating for you and your child. They’ll figure it out. Sit back and enjoy the game! And if you’ve got one of those foam #1 finger gloves, wave it furiously.

The Message

This Olympic champion’s message is clear for all youth athletes – varied athletic exposure and the role of the parent are critical! The National Youth Sport Health & Safety Institute supports and encourages these key “Best Practices” for parents:

- Expose your son or daughter to a variety of sports and activities throughout his or her childhood
- Allow your child to choose sports or activities of interest to him or her
- Avoid coaching your own child by critiquing performance when you do not serve as his or her credentialed coach
- If your child doesn’t want to go to practice, quietly determine the reason.
 - Is the program not fun?
 - Is there too much pressure?
 - Is the training unreasonably difficult?
 - Is your child burned out, too tired or injured?
 - Is your child falling behind in school studies?If yes, then encourage your child to take time off from the sport.
- Parental feedback should emphasize “I love to watch you play!” (or perform the activity he or she is involved in)

You don’t have to be an Olympian to be a “gold-medal” parent – sign the *Parent Pledge* today! (nyshsi.org)

Cote´ J., R. Lidor and D. Hackfort, ISSP position stand: To sample or specialize? Seven postulates about youth sport activities that lead to continued participation and elite performance. International Journal of Sport Psychology 7(1):7-17, 2009.



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