

Why College Coaches Prefer Multi-Sport Athletes

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College lacrosse coaches say they value athletes who play multiple sports over those who specialize exclusively in lacrosse. But do they follow their own advice?

We asked five coaches what other sports *their* kids play — and how they feel that has benefitted their overall youth or high school sports experience.

Chris Bates, Princeton

Bates' 12-year-old son, Nick, plays soccer, basketball and lacrosse.

On recruiting multi-sport athletes: "These guys have a high level of athleticism but probably haven't peaked yet as lacrosse players. Once they get to college, they will specialize and will develop and blossom. They usually have a steep growth curve, whereas some of the kids who have been single-sport athletes tend to burn out quicker. Oftentimes, they don't have as much left in the tank."

Advice to parents: "If you are in that environment where your kid is specializing in one sport across several seasons, understand what you are getting for what you are paying. You want to be in a good teaching environment. With so much focus these days on games, games, games, what's getting lost is practice, practice, practice."

About his son: "He plays these sports because he loves to do so. But even now, some of his coaches want him to play across several seasons. We have to draw some limits, and explain that in the spring, he'll be playing lacrosse and not soccer, which he plays in the fall. The boundaries have to be clear. I'd frown on having my son play just one sport. There are lots of transitive properties — things like spacing, vision and defensive footwork — that he brings from one sport to the other."

Matt Kerwick, Cornell

Kerwick's 9-year-old son, Thomas, participates in swimming, running and karate. His 8-year-old son, Sean, plays soccer, ice hockey and lacrosse.

On recruiting multi-sport athletes: "We certainly see more well-rounded athletes who have an ability to accept different coaching styles. They understand the dynamics of being on a team. That's not to say that we don't like seeing athletes who are also involved in individual sports, where they have to have the discipline to push themselves to be their best."

Advice to parents: "Don't think your kid is missing out by not playing lacrosse all year long. As coaches, we'd rather see them competing in multiple sports. There's a lot more benefit to that

than in having a lacrosse stick in your hand year-round. College coaches are more interested in the intangibles."

About his sons: "One of the things I love about having my kids involved in multiple sports and activities is the friendships they are making. Certainly, being physically fit and developing as athletes are also important benefits, but they are also learning lessons about being good teammates and working together as a group. And of course, it's important that they are having fun."

Janine Tucker, Johns Hopkins

Tucker's 21-year-old son, Ryan, plays lacrosse at Virginia. He also played soccer in high school. Her 20-year-old son, Devin, played soccer and lacrosse through high school.

On recruiting multi-sport athletes: "We prefer to recruit players who are multi-sport athletes for a variety of reasons, first among them the diversity of skill sets that they develop. It also allows opportunities to be leaders, to stay in good shape, to stretch themselves as athletes, communicators, teammates and leaders. Another benefit, maybe in one sport the kid shines and is a leader. In another sport, they may not be the superstar. So they learn to be humble, to be a good teammate and to support the go-to players. That's a tremendous benefit."

Advice to parents: "Of the recruits we see, one of the first questions I ask is, 'Do you play basketball?' If they do, they understand angles, footwork and how to get low on defense. Those are critical skill sets for basketball players that are engrained in their heads. We also love soccer players, because they can run all day. Those skill sets translate into our game. There's pressure for kids to specialize in lacrosse. I see it backfiring. Often it's the parents who want to their kids to specialize. That's dicey. A lot of these lacrosse recruits are on teams that go 20-0. If you play soccer and are on a .500 team, you learn to manage tough losses and pick yourself back up. That's an invaluable experience as you grow."

On the burnout factor: "Playing multiple sports also keeps sports and competing fresh for kids. No offense to the kid who's played just one sport since age 6, but by junior year of high school, they're burned out from that one sport. At our level, you must have a burning passion to compete, to work hard and play at high level. That wanes if you're burning out early. Embracing playing another sport helps keep lacrosse more fresh; you're more pumped get out there and get your stick in your hand. You can still do extra work on lacrosse, while playing soccer, basketball and field hockey."



Johns Hopkins women's lacrosse coach Janine Tucker says her son, Virginia midfielder Ryan Tucker, developed mental toughness as a middle-school wrestler.

About her kids: "Ryan wrestled through middle school, and in eighth grade, I watched a transformation of him. He transformed his whole mindset and developed that mental toughness to zero in on an opponent, to challenge himself to fight to get that extra point. That was a turning point for him. If it wasn't for wrestling, that mental toughness would've taken longer to come. The way he carried himself after that, what he said, just listening to him — you could tell he learned to really dig deep to compete. That was life-changing for him... With both of them, playing multiple sports exposed them to different kinds of coaching. It helped them get a big-picture understanding that teams do things differently — philosophies, styles — and athletes must pull what they can from a coach, a style, an environment to play. The great byproduct of those differences is that it helped them in so many situations — life, sports, the classroom — to communicate differently and assert themselves."

Jeff Tambroni, Penn State

Tambroni's 12-year-old daughter, Carissa, plays ice hockey, field hockey and golf. His 10-year-old daughter, Maddie, plays field hockey, lacrosse and golf. His 6-year-old daughter, Ella, is a gymnast and plays soccer.

On recruiting multi-sport athletes: "I really believe multi-sport participation increases the athletic I.Q. of players. Players can work individually on developing skills, but being a member of different teams provides opportunities to develop game instincts that produce more athletic players. There are parallels between certain sports, and we'll look at a player's athleticism in another sport and project his potential as a lacrosse player."

Advice to parents: "I understand that sometimes we are speaking out of both sides of our mouth by saying we encourage athletes to play two or three sports in high school, while the reality is that we're looking to recruit the player who is the best fit for our program, whether they play one sport or three. But all things being equal, meaning that we're considering two players with comparable skills, we'll take the multi-sport athlete."

About his daughters: "Obviously, we're not concerned about recruiting at this point in their lives. It's more about exposing them to different options, allowing them to enjoy themselves and letting them choose what they want to continue playing. We make sure that there is a balance so that each sport stays fresh. I love that they are learning about being part of a team and also developing friendships."

Scott Marr, Albany

Marr's 17-year-old son, Kyle, plays ice hockey and lacrosse. His 16-year-old daughter, Jordyn, plays ice hockey, lacrosse and golf.

On recruiting multi-sport athletes: "What we like is the diversity that these kids experience — different rules, different skill sets, different coaching styles. They're not doing the same thing all the time, but learning and understanding different strategies and muscle memory. It strengthens the mind to learn different skills. And they may experience different roles on different teams, like being the best player on one team but a supporting player on another team. That can be valuable and gives them great perspective."

Advice to parents: "Don't succumb to the pressure that your kid 'has to do this' to get to the next level. The myth is that if you miss this tournament or that camp that you won't make it. That's not true. I don't feel like you get the best out of kids when they are playing a sport nine months out of the year. Nothing feels really special anymore, because they are playing all the time and feel like they have to be at every tournament."

About his kids: "One of the hockey teams my daughter is being encouraged to play for next year has a coach who has said he doesn't want her to play other sports. I can tell you she won't be playing for him next year. I've noticed in my kids that their enthusiasm is much stronger when they return to a sport that they haven't played for several months. They're excited to get the stick back in their hand. Taking a break keeps it fresh."