

# Risk and Uncertainty in Youth Sport: A Philosophical Look at Specialization

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**Abstract:** An increasing number of children playing sports face pressure (both parental and societal) to specialize at an early age, to focus exclusively on one sport with the hope of securing a college scholarship. So-called “travel teams,” once the domain of tweens and teens, now extends to the very youngest children, with athletes (and parents) traveling exceedingly long distances, and spending large sums of money, virtually year-round.

Through the course of this paper, I glean from both American philosophical themes, and current literature related to social change, to help at least partially answer this question regarding youth sport specialization. I contend that these conceptual ideas help provide language for us to think more clearly about some of the issues surrounding youth sport specialization.

To begin, the potential downsides of youth sport specialization are patently clear. Focusing on one particular sport at a young age presents latent hazards. At an appropriate point, however, this specialization holds the potential for exploring the notion of commitment in extremis. After engaging in multiple sport options during elementary school years, the adolescent soccer player, for example, may decide to pursue the “beautiful game” to see what potential it may bring.

My aim is to examine sport participation, specifically during the process where youth become committed to a particular sport. In this way, I move from issues of early exploration with youth sport to issues related to commitment and immersion. My contention is that youth sport participants who choose to focus on a particular sport, to make it their own, and make this decision (largely) on their own – act in a way which is consistent with the language of American philosopher, William James. James is fitting here, as Ilundain-Aguruza (2015) explains, because his works are “suited for a holistic conception of enactive performance . . . [and include a focus on] asceticism and risk, and those regarding cognition and action” (p. 259).

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## Introduction

Despite a recent drop-off in youth sport participation over the past decade – down 8% according to Sports & Fitness Industry Association and Aspen Institute data – thousands of US children, ages 6 through 12, participate in youth sports in some capacity. The ubiquity of youth soccer programs is but one example of the widespread realm of youth sport. Nevertheless, for an increasing number of these children, there is pressure (both parental and societal) to specialize at an early age and to focus exclusively on one sport with the hope of securing a college scholarship. So-called “travel teams,” once the domain of tweens and teens, now extend to the very youngest children, with athletes (and parents) traveling exceedingly long distances, and spending large sums of money, virtually year-round.

In this paper, I examine these trends with hopes of moving towards a normative position on youth sport specialization. In other words, the purpose of this paper is to examine to what extent youth sport specialization is good, just, healthy, and right. Through the course of this paper I lean on notions of the good life and self – as espoused by 19th and 20th century American philosophers, with particular emphasis on the writings of William James – to examine questions surrounding youth sport specialization.

The topic of youth sport specialization and the role of coaches in this process of decision-making brings to mind Westley, Zimmerman and Patton’s (2007) book, *Getting to maybe: How the world is changed*, in which the authors outline the difficulties of social transformation in the face of monumental global challenges, such as systemic poverty reduction and environmental concerns. They posit that the concept of “maybe” effectively and “accurately describes our fundamental relationship to the world” (p. xiii). In this way, “maybe” becomes a “potent word for the brave, the inventive, the adventurous,” although “‘Maybe’ comes with no guarantees, only a chance” (p. xiv). Youth sport coaches certainly face uncertainty in the course of their interaction with young athletes. Through their interaction with athletes, coaching offers no guarantees, only a chance for success (however the label of success might be defined). In order to move forward, and without having complete certainty, the coach must indeed make decisions in a manner that might be described as brave, inventive and/or adventurous – decisions that, at times, involve youth sport specialization. Youth sport athletes also face uncertainty. Whether they focus on one sport or play many, they do not know with any final certainty how their sport experience will turn out – whether they will play a starting role on their team, set personal records, or whether their efforts will only result in injury or a reserve-team role.

While youth sport specialization is common, the potential downsides of youth sport specialization are patently clear. Focusing on one particular sport at a young age presents latent hazards. Organizations such as the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recognize both the situation and its potential risks. In a 2000 statement (affirmed in 2015), the AAP Committee on Sports Medicine and Fitness wrote, “Children are encouraged to participate in sports at a level consistent with their abilities and interests. Pushing children beyond these limits is discouraged as is specialization in a single sport before adolescence.” At an appropriate point, however, this specialization holds the potential for exploring the notion of commitment in extremis. After engaging in multiple sport options during elementary school years, the adolescent soccer player, for example, may decide to pursue the “beautiful game” to see what potential it may bring.

This situation relates to a passage from American philosopher William James. In *Psychology: The Briefer Course*, James (1892) wrote: “So the seeker of his truest, strongest, deepest self must review the list carefully, and pick out the one on which to stake his salvation. All other selves thereupon become unreal, but the fortunes of this self are real” (p. 186). James was an unabashed advocate of the “strenuous life,” which included the potential for risk and precipitousness. To this point, youth-sport athletes’ commitment to a single sport potentially exemplifies the kind of strenuous life James had in mind – a life of significance. In this vein, a deep and sustained commitment to one sport may potentially lead to a rich and meaningful life and requires a certain degree of autonomy. In short, sport specialization has the potential, under the right conditions, to contribute to human growth (Hochstetler & Hopsicker, 2012).

These Jamesian notions raise several pertinent questions, not only for youth sport athletes, but for their parents and guardians, coaches and youth sport administrators as well. For example, what does it mean for youth-sport athletes to seek out this “truest, strongest, and deepest self”? At what point, in terms of physiological and psychological development, are they capable of making a fully informed decision? If these athletes decide to specialize in one sport, are there potential risks related to their own health? Similarly, to what extent does specialization potentially bring about risks related to academic success, the development of social relationships, or the potential of becoming self-absorbed and/or tunnel-minded? And finally, by virtue of choosing only one sport, what is the potential loss (or gain) in terms of other experiences?

In his article, *Sport, Parental Autonomy, and Children’s Right to an Open Future*, Dixon (2007) examines this topic of youth sport, seeking to scrutinize the extent to which parents should encourage youth sport participation, not necessarily in regards to well-being, but rather “as a matter of allowing them to have control over the kind of life that they will live as children and adults” (p. 147). Dixon recognizes the complexity of the situation in that encouraging some children, who might have more “modest” talent, could effectively narrow their future options, while encouraging other children, who have “exceptional athletic gifts,” could potentially open options, such as an increase in self-fulfillment within a given pursuit. In contrast, Russell (2011) and Torres (2015) caution this future-focused approach. Russell, for example, argues that placing an undue emphasis on a child’s future “gives too much priority to the rights and interests of the adults the children will become and fails to respect the rights and interests of children as the individuals they are now” (p. 88). Youth sport may in fact provide immediate benefits to the participants. As Torres highlights, “some goods (i.e., benefits, skills, predispositions, and experiences) might be only, or primarily, available during childhood” (p. 306).

While Dixon, Russell, and Torres focus primarily on children and childhood, my aim here is to examine sport participation during the process where youth become committed to a particular sport through what is known as specialization. In this way, I provide an extension, moving from issues of early exploration with youth sport to issues related to commitment, immersion, and investment. I examine the notion of autonomy but do so in the context of the decision-making process of whether to commit oneself to a given sport.

Throughout the paper, I contend that William James and other American philosophers concerned with the concept of the self provide language that enriches our understanding of the nature of commitment

in youth sport. My contention is that youth sport participants who choose to focus on a particular sport, to make it their own, and to make this decision (largely) on their own – act in a way that is consistent with the admonition of William James regarding a significant life. James is fitting here, as Ilundain-Agurreza (2015) explains, because his works are “suited for a holistic conception of enactive performance . . . [and include a focus on] asceticism and risk, and those regarding cognition and action” (p. 259). For the pre-teen, participating in multiple activities – both sports and otherwise – provide numerous benefits, not the least reducing the chance of repetitive use injuries. Dixon (2007) raises the topic of enabling children to have an open future – which refers “to keeping open as many options as possible for the competent adults that the children will become so that they will then be able to make maximally autonomous choices as to how to live their lives” (p. 149). In this way, the child who samples from a sport menu of soccer, basketball, karate, and softball at an early age may have sufficient time to develop skills and determine, at some point over the course of many years, whether or not to become committed to any one particular sport. This open future may be understood in a broad sense as well. Exploring sport and physical activity along with other practices (MacIntyre, 1984), such as the fine arts or more traditional academic pursuits, may allow the youngster time to develop interests and determine suitability for the future.

This open future hinges on what James (1896) refers to as “genuine options.” By this phrase, James meant those options of the “forced, living, and momentous kind” (p. 3). For the awkward youngster with limited footwork and skills, trying out for an elite soccer team may not be a genuine option. In other words, this opportunity may not be “living” or practical. This child may have other, more fitting, options at his or her disposal. Furthermore, James contends that we may not pursue all options with equal depth or interest. Rather, at some point we may need to choose, or decide on our own, to “stake our salvation” as it were on some particular genuine option. For the youth-sport athlete, this genuine option may arise in the form of a particular sport commitment. This is not to say our choices may not change over time but rather that in order to live what James terms a “significant” life, we must necessarily invest our time and energy in particularly focused human projects. In order to become a talented writer or singer or physician one must spend the requisite time and energy to become proficient in the field. The same is true for elite athletes and dedicated youth sport participants. At some point, these individuals come to a period in life where they need to decide whether to commit and what this commitment entails, both for themselves and for those around them.

In addition to James, other American philosophical writers address issues related to decision-making as well. This is a theme in Henry David Thoreau’s (2012) writing, for example, illustrated in the following passage: “As long as possible live free and uncommitted” (p. 265). A noted proponent of transcendentalism, Thoreau famously spent two years living apart from society near Walden Pond – a period that enabled him to test out (and chronicle) some of his philosophical ideals. On one level, this recommendation by Thoreau holds practical application concerning youth sport. There is wisdom, and plenty of supportive research, to show that remaining a multi-sport athlete through adolescence is beneficial. While playing multiple sports is not necessarily “free and uncommitted” (engagement in sport of any kind requires a certain level of commitment, even if it involves multiple sports rather than year-round participation in one sport), it does represent a level of caution and also patience with regards to a commitment to specialize.

Thoreau recognized the tendency for people to commit to obligations (e.g., farming, business, marriage) that ended up posing hazardous consequences. He worried about individuals who felt obligated to take on responsibility and strive towards success but the commitment, in this sense, ended up dictating their daily efforts in a way that was not life-breathing or meaningful.

### **Seeking a “truest, strongest, deepest self”**

Recognizing the advantages of keeping one’s options open, and the potential for developing a level of excellence through a certain degree of focused efforts – how might adults – and coaches in particular – best guide young athletes through this decision-making process? Or, in James’ words, how might they help guide athletes toward a “truest, strongest, deepest self”? While this is not totally in the hands of the coach, and should include parent and athlete input, the coach does indeed have a potential role to play when it comes to help providing feedback on this decision. By virtue of the position, coaches provide guidance and influence for youth sport participants. With careful attention, these individuals may direct and teach youth sport participants in ways that positively help shape the lives of these youth.

To begin, what does it mean to pursue the truest self? To pursue sport in this manner, the participant engages with a sport that best matches with his or her personality, an activity where the athlete feels comfortable, at home, and can fully express who he or she is. Perhaps the youth soccer player, for example, is a bit more endowed with skills associated with baseball or volleyball but seems to “come alive” while moving on the soccer pitch. Conversely, the elementary school student may continue playing baseball because of social influence or at the behest of parents as opposed to pursuing an activity that resonates deeply within him or herself. To this end, the coach may help identify those times and places where the athlete “lights up” or “comes alive,” – and enter into a conversation with the athlete around these moments. Additionally, the coach can ensure, through sound pedagogical strategies, that a particular sport is taught in a manner most likely to foster both skill development as well as intrinsic meaning and a love of the activity.

Next, athletes who pursue a sport that highlights their natural abilities do so consistent with their “strongest self.” The soccer player who has a so-called “mind for the game,” and excels with ball handling skills, agility, speed and endurance; the golfer with an affinity for hours of concentrated effort on the course, coupled with a propensity to work on his or her game at the driving range. The strongest self is undoubtedly linked to genetic predisposition towards a particular sport and activity. Even with dedicated and rigorous training for endurance sport, the youth athlete with a high percentage of fast twitch muscle fiber type is more apt to excel with sprint-related sport pursuits. That said, the devotion to dedicated practice is an essential component of excellence. Again, the coach, along with other adults, may help the athlete recognize which talents are most visible and present. This might include both a keen eye for recognizing individual player strengths, and developing plans to enhance these strengths through skill development and overall conditioning. An aspect of safety comes into play here as well. If coaches fail to follow safety protocol (e.g., periodization in training, acclimatization to heat), athletes may succumb to injury and never have the opportunity to fully recognize their potential.

Finally, what does it mean to pursue the deepest self? When the soccer player chooses to move forward, and stakes his salvation on soccer, he leaves all other selves behind in the sense that they go unexplored. Not choosing to run cross-country, for example, leaves the potential in this area unrealized. One simply cannot plumb the depths of the “deepest self” without laying all other selves at least partially to rest. There are certainly benefits (especially at the high school level and younger) with playing multiple sports – these athletes are much less prone to overuse injuries or burnout, for example. However, continued engagement with a particular sport, gleaned over the course of many years (Gladwell, 2008) provides a moving narrative for the individual. The athlete develops a long-standing relationship with the sport and the respective practice community (MacIntyre, 1984), which would not have been possible without pursuing this relationship in depth. The coach may assist in this process by talking with athletes about the nature of a deep commitment to sport – the intensity of training required, coupled with the prospect of both failure and success. Athletes would benefit from hearing from others regarding what this decision-making process looked like – what they gave up, what they gained, how they developed as a person, and so forth.

When youth sport athletes choose to commit themselves to a sport, ideally this commitment involves the athlete’s truest, strongest, deepest self, as opposed to a self which is projected by the parents, coaches, other adults, or peers. When children are forced into a sport commitment, or participate because of adult expectations (either implicit or explicit) they may end up hating the sport or the adult(s) or both. Similarly, when the youngster joins a team largely because of social reasons, or because it is the popular sport, it may not be the athlete’s truest, strongest, or deepest self. Conversely, when children become gradually immersed in the sport practice community, perhaps encouraged (rather than forced) by parents and other adults, developing their own agency in addition to skill acquisition and friendships, they potentially develop a lifelong love affair with their sport of choice.

### **Tension between self-reliance and our social nature**

Part of the difficulty in this area of helping youth towards decision-making involves a tension between two aspects of contemporary life. On one hand, we value (especially in the United States) the notion of self-reliance. This concept, perhaps most famously espoused by Ralph Waldo Emerson in the 19th century, entails the ability to accomplish feats without aid from others. On the other hand, we value our social nature, our opportunity to work and play with others, and the extent to which we belong to social groups.

To emphasize our social nature, Alasdair MacIntyre (1984) famously wrote, “we are never more (and sometimes less) than the co-authors of our own narratives” (p. 213). Taken to the youth-sport area, in order to strive towards and potentially attain excellence, the athlete must necessarily work hard and put in the requisite amount of practice time, relying on some modicum of personal fortitude. Yet, the athlete does so within a broader social context, practicing alongside other athletes, training under the watchful eyes of coaches, supported by parents and/or guardians, and encouraged by peers and other members of society. The commitment entails a certain aspect of our social nature as humans. As MacIntyre (1984) writes, “I can only answer the question ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question ‘Of what story or stories do I find

myself a part?” (p. 216). For the soccer player, the social dynamics of his or her surroundings have a bearing on his or her respective decision. It makes a difference if influential others have committed in similar ways.

James outlines the nature of our humanness, acknowledging the dialectical relationship between the individual and community, and explains this notion of what he terms the “Social Me.” James considers the Social Me as shaping each individual’s persona and actions, and the motivation behind behaviors needed for positive peer recognition. “We have an innate propensity to get ourselves noticed (favorably) by our kind,” James (1992) writes, “If every person we met ‘cut us dead,’ and acted as if we were non-existing things, a kind of rage and impotent despair would ere long well up in us” (pp. 176–177).

The Social Me also includes an aspect of peer recognition; for example, the swimmer who is known in his or her community and school, across the county and state, as “a swimmer” based on his or her dedication to the craft and his record-setting times. The Social Me also factors into the decision to “stake one’s salvation” on a particular sport. The youth soccer player gains recognition from peers and family members; he or she sees other soccer players succeed, recognizing the talent levels of elite players, emulating them and wanting to succeed like them. In the best sense, our social nature has the capacity to positively impact the youth-athlete process of moving towards commitment and specialization – if those in the athlete’s sphere of influence remain cognizant of the athlete’s “truest, strongest, deepest self.”

That said, the process of guiding children along the path of high-performance sport participation is fraught with many challenges. Because they lack the wisdom and maturity of adults, we typically cede some child-focused decision-making tasks to parents and/or guardians – in other words, we employ levels of paternalism. For minors to run in a half-marathon, for example, typically requires a parental signature – the parent acting (in fact, deciding) on behalf of the child. The argument is that the child does not have full knowledge of the potential risks involved in running a race of this length.

This notion of commitment for youth sport athletes, and determining recommendations and guidelines set by well-meaning parents, coaches, and administrators – is complicated by the fact that children and youth mature at different times and in different ways. One 12 year old may be physically ready for the extreme training necessary for year-round specialization but a similarly aged peer may not. Furthermore, the 12 year old may be physically ready and yet not be in an emotional state of readiness to commit to such a high level of training. Gender may also impact the extent to which youth sport participants approach their athletic commitments (e.g., Jayanthi & Dugas, 2017).

Tymowski (2001) frames this issue in terms of competencies, in other words the ability to accomplish certain tasks with a great deal of success. As children grow and mature, they develop a broader range and depth of competencies, acquiring an expansive sense of autonomy in the process. At a young age, they may have proficiencies with decisions, such as selecting what clothes to wear or what to eat for lunch. As they develop, their competencies around decision-making moves to those regarding college, vocation, or perhaps life-long partner. That said, Tymowski writes: “Because in general terms their competencies may be limited, their autonomy is limited, and they are treated paternalistically so as to assure their future autonomy as an adult” (65). Sage adults remain attentive to this gradual development with regards to

competency, enabling youth to take on greater responsibility when their skill set is ready. However, and keeping with the theme of risk and uncertainty, one does not know for sure that the child is fully ready to take on an additional responsibility. Allowing a 15-year old to make a decision fully autonomously as to whether or not to specialize may work well. This may also have negative consequences. So many variables are at stake and so much is dependent on the individual youth athlete and the particular context. This is one reason why adult mentorship (e.g., coaches) – with adults who are both wise and compassionate – is vital. The youth, also, needs to accept and take on additional autonomy (and risk) as the years go by.

In the course of her argument, Tymowski advances rights for children’s sport participants. She lists two as foundational for the rest: “the right of a child not to be harmed, and the second is the right to self-determination” (p. 82). This right of self-determination seems to run consistent with Dixon in terms of keeping the best options open, and also acknowledges Torres’ and Russell’s point to recognize and underscore the athlete’s current interests and rights. Simply put, the youth sport athlete is able to appreciate both the merits of current participation along with the potential for future life opportunities. This self-determination is not solipsistic, however, but should ideally develop in the context of a practice community. This would entail making decisions about sport commitment alongside peers, coaches, and parents, and taking into consideration the available wisdom from caring parents/guardians. As James put it, the important point here is that this determination is what is in the best interest of the youth – and the decision itself is ideally made by the athlete.

Tymowski writes, “Children should be allowed to determine their own levels of commitment to any particular sport, albeit under the watchful eyes of their parents, guardians, coaches, and other adults involved” (p. 84). This should be part of an ongoing dialogue between youth, parents, coaches, about the intentions of the child. This watchfulness is best understood in a positive sense, not watchful in order to pick out flaws or imperfections, not watchful in terms of living out an adult’s vicarious dream, but watchful in terms of acquiring evidence that may be helpful in obtaining an overall picture of the child in relationship with the sport community. This sense of watchfulness plays an important role in the youth sport athlete becoming increasingly acclimated to the practice community. The athlete gradually learns what is required to succeed. The coach, who may have a long-standing relationship with the practice community, will have the capability to explain the requisite needs for success (e.g., skill level, fitness level) and can see how the athlete potentially matches with the level of excellence required. This necessitates a certain level of attentiveness on the part of the coach – being able to see how the athlete is developing in the overall context of the sport. This watchfulness is just one example of the complex nature of coaching (and parenting) when it comes to negotiating the possibility of specialization.

Youth sport athletes move along a continuum of sorts towards a degree of autonomy. When 5-year-olds embark on a soccer experience, they have a very limited vocabulary and understanding of the experience. At this point they do not fully understand or appreciate the risks and benefits of youth sport. For this reason, we fully expect guardians and parents to make informed decisions on behalf of the children. In fact, as Schapiro (1999) explains, “the condition of childhood is one in which the agent is not yet in a position to speak in her own voice because there is no voice which counts as hers” (p. 729). The child is still early in



the developmental stage of life, exploring various options along the way in the process of growth and maturation. Youth sport provides a way to navigate the journey towards adulthood. Again, Schapiro writes that, “By engaging in play, children more or less deliberately ‘try on’ selves to be and worlds to be in” (p. 732). Five year olds in youth soccer programs “try on” what it means to become a soccer player, investing in a gradual way to become more familiar with the culture.

As children grow and mature, adults recognize that a certain degree of risk in youth sport participation becomes acceptable and even necessary for growth and development, both as an athlete and person. To this end, Russell (2007) argues for the value of self-affirmation, where “at a certain point in child development physical risks should be tolerated, and children’s choices (and adults’ choices on their behalf) to engage them should frequently be respected, even if the risks of such activities are greater than necessary to promote the developmental goods sought by the common sense view” (p. 177). While Russell speaks most directly to the physical risk involved with dangerous sport and recreation, it is clear that commitment to sport also entails a significant amount of emotional risk. The high school soccer player who undergoes soccer tryouts does so with trepidation and potential risk associated with not making the team.

Deciding to specialize engenders a great deal of uncertainty. In this vein, MacIntyre (1984) explains, “we have to be prepared to take whatever self-engendering risks are demanded along the way; and we have to listen carefully to what we are told about our own inadequacies and to reply with the same carefulness for the facts” (p. 191). The athlete becomes committed to the practice and needs to do so in order to fully experience the requisite internal goods. Doing so is not without a level of risk taking and precipitousness.

These youth sport commitments may occur gradually, over the course of months or years. Alternatively, the decisions may be almost made instantaneously, in the terminology of Russell (2007), “spontaneous and momentous change (p. xii).” This change may be as a result of something a coach or parent said, perhaps, either positively or negatively. The decision may occur because of success or even failure, or perhaps the realization of what may be available through the course of commitment. While the individual athlete may have autonomy in the ultimate decision, the context may be such that the decision is deeply influenced by others.

As James recognized, with commitment comes a particular change of identity along with a certain tradeoff. In order to focus on one particular “Me,” one must necessarily relinquish the potential for exploring other “Me’s.” In other words, to head down the path of greatness as a baseball player, one gives up on, at least temporarily and perhaps forever, the potential to become a gymnast. As James (1992) says, “But to make any one of them actual, the rest must more or less be suppressed. . . All other selves thereupon become unreal, but the fortunes of this self are real.” [p. 186]. The middle school athlete who participates in three sports – soccer, basketball, and baseball – may identify as an athlete, but not necessarily as a soccer player or baseball player. If this individual decides to pursue only basketball in high school, however, this impacts his or her identity. Because of this commitment to one sport, perhaps to include year-round training and conditioning work, he or she may come to view him or herself as a basketball player (and others may view

him or her in this way also). Furthermore, his or her potential success in soccer goes undeveloped – he or she willingly chooses not to pursue this option of sport or this particular sport identity.

The athlete commits to the sport, in part, because of the immersive qualities he or she experiences. Bugbee (1999) defines immersion as, “a mode of living in the present with complete absorption; one has the sense of being comprehended and sustained in a universal situation (pp. 51-52). This sense of immersion, for the soccer player, is both the attraction and the outcome of the eventual decision. As the youth explores the game, as his or her skill level increases along with confidence and joy in the game, he or she experiences this quality of absorption – a play-like stance where he or she may literally forget what time it is (Kretchmar, 2006). While on the soccer pitch, he or she is completely focused on the task, forgetting at least for a temporary period, homework or relationships or family responsibilities.

While James spoke in glowing terms regarding the importance of making a commitment, of taking the requisite risks involved in doing so, there are certainly potential problems regarding youth athletes who “stake their salvation” on one particular sport. They may, for example, end up choosing the “wrong” sport. Perhaps the child has very little in the way of natural eye-foot coordination and, instead, appears to have an abundance of slow twitch muscle fiber and propensity for long-distance pursuits. The longer this individual continues with soccer, the longer the untapped potential for exploring success in endurance sport. In short, the so-called wrong decision may not be easily discernable until after the decision has been made, with significant investment of time and energy.

Similarly, the youth athlete may effectively choose the “right” sport but for the wrong reason(s). For example, perhaps the individual decides to specialize in cross-country running, an endeavor which matches his or her slim physique, cardiovascular fitness level, and ability to withstand extensive training. However, if the athlete chooses to commit solely because of his or her friends, or parental pressure, or to pursue a collegiate athletic scholarship – and does not find or experience intrinsic meaning in the sport itself – the reasons may become problematic. The athlete may experience athletic success and yet not find or experience any deep significance, and may actually dread the running activity itself. Additionally, the athlete may indeed choose the right sport, for the right reasons, but may end up becoming consumed by the endeavor; developing what sport and exercise psychologists refer to as exercise addiction. In this way, a potentially positive activity, such as sport, becomes increasingly negative and may ultimately adversely influence the individual in many ways: physically, socially, psychologically, and even financially. Examples include symptoms such as musculoskeletal (overuse) injury, bouts of depression (when not able to exercise), and relationship issues (Landolfi, E., 2013).

As mentioned previously, sport has the potential to impact relationships in a number of manners. This might be family relationships, those amongst and between peers, relationships with coaches, and so forth. A decision to commit on the part of the athlete may necessarily impact the relationship with others. Deciding to undertake rigorous training for one sport may leave the multi-talented, potential three-sport athlete, unable to take on other sports and this may end up severing relationships with other sport coaches. That said, specializing on one sport may potentially deepen some relationships (e.g., teammates, coaches). If the same group of athletes and coaches commit to one sport for a number of years, the experiences

undergone during this time period may be impactful. While the athlete may realize, on the conceptual level, that focusing on one sport may be to his or her advantage, leaving other sport options behind (and the relationships developed over years) may be difficult to undertake. The athlete may face difficulty with parents, too, regarding these decisions. For example, perhaps the parent(s) hoped the athlete would pursue gymnastics, placing the child in lessons at an early age, paying for costly coaching, travel to meets and such. If this youth athlete ultimately decides to pursue swimming rather than gymnastics, the child (and parents too) faces the tenuous task of unrealized expectations and potential hurt feelings and misunderstandings.

Making a commitment, or deciding to specialize on one sport, requires a deliberate focus on one pursuit, but at the same time pushes aside alternative experiences and, potentially, relationships. Athletes of all ages and levels need to be wary that the pursuit of excellence, in the form of commitment, is not without inherent risk, ones that would cause concern, even for William James. As Rick Reilly (2014), columnist for ESPN the Magazine wrote, “The world’s most legendary athletes are usually the ones most wildly out of balance. . . Andre Agassi grieves, to this day, the childhood he gave up while hitting over a million practice balls. Enjoy your heroes, but don’t envy them.” Our own commitments, and those of our children and other youngsters, bring about both opportunities and consequences. This underscores the point regarding the task of parents: to help make decisions for children that recognize these very risks.

The decision to commit certainly does not guarantee success of any kind. As James (in Stuhr, 1987) wrote, “life concretely comes and the expression which it bears of being, or at least of involving, a muddle and a struggle, with an ‘ever not quite’ to all our formulas, and novelty and possibility forever leaking in” (p. 98). In other words, life happens. This is part of what makes the commitment for youth sport athletes so uncertain and risky. These individuals may have valuable and appropriate intentions and have their life planned out – committing to one particular sport and, for example, planning to continue this passion at the college level. That said, “novelty and possibility” may arise, however, if the athlete becomes injured, or a beloved coach takes another position, or the athlete does not attain the level of athletic success desired.

Another potential risk entails the potential political nature of youth sport. While the practice community may provide plenty of positive aspects, as MacIntyre (1984) writes, institutions “are characteristically and necessarily concerned with what I have called external goods. They are involved in acquiring money and other material goods; they are structured in terms of power and status, and they distribute money, power and status as rewards” (p. 194). A field hockey player may decide to dedicate him or herself to this sport, and focus exclusively on pursuing a high school varsity sport team or travel team spot. This plan, no fault of his or her own, may unfortunately become derailed by the institution of travel field hockey and the political battles that may exist among adults. For example, the athlete may not be chosen for the high school team because the coach “plays favorites” and invites an influential community member’s son or daughter to play instead.

The decision to specialize, to push forward towards one specific practice, proceeds without absolute certainty of the eventual experience or results. The youth-sport athlete gives him or herself to training without knowing whether or not he or she will make the team, or make the starting lineup, or earn meaningful playing time, or receive a college scholarship, or make any sort of professional team. While

hundreds of thousands of youth soccer players around the globe have dreams of playing in college or professionally, the chances are miniscule. Despite this lack of absolute certainty, James would have us (and the youth-sport participant) forge ahead with our intentional, and passionate, commitments – be that soccer, another sport, or any other human project. He (1896) wrote:

“Not a victory is gained, not a deed of faithfulness or courage is done, except upon a maybe; not a service, not a sally of generosity, not a scientific exploration or experiment or textbook, that may not be a mistake. It is only by risking our persons from one hour to another that we live at all. And often enough our faith beforehand in an uncertified result is the only thing that makes the result come true.” (p. 59)

Rather than absolute certainty, this notion of decision-making towards commitment entails what Anderson (2006) refers to as a “working certainty.” By this term he means “we see that there is something . . . that we can ‘count on’” (p. 68), just enough curiosity and a sense of the right direction that prompts us towards action. The youth-sport athlete does not fully know what will happen when he or she risks specialization. There are no guarantees, only a working certainty that provides the impetus (and hope) to move forward, to commit to training, trusting that these efforts will bear fruit (whether or not this means making the team, or getting a scholarship, or making new friends, or accomplishing goals, or learning one’s limits). In other words, we need what Anderson (2006), terms “a sense of faith in, a working certainty of, which growth and what opening of possibility we ought to pursue” (p. 83). Coaches, by virtue of their position and training, may help youth-sport athletes navigate this decision, helping them explore available areas of growth and openings of possibility.

Anderson (2006) continues that, “working certainties establish an outlook and a world in the wilderness through and in which we can act and dwell” (p. 72). If the athlete has a certain degree of working certainty, he or she can take action – joining a club team, engaging the tryout process, committing him or herself to preseason training, giving up other sport commitments or even friendships to pursue this sport commitment. Furthermore, this working certainty affords a level of patience to see the extent to which this action becomes fruitful; it does not involve expecting results or improvement overnight, but rather allows time for development in terms of growth and maturity in skill level, physiological attributes, confidence and so forth.

A certain degree of motivation and self-determination related to commitment arises based on intrinsic factors. To borrow a term from Thoreau, the athlete recognizes the “inner muse,” or aspects of the activity that seem to call for this kind of immersive attraction to a particular sport. While others may encourage this involvement, and perhaps stroke the ego of athletes with budding promise, an external motivation alone will not suffice. James (1892), too, recognized this when he wrote, “Neither threats nor pleadings can move a man unless they touch some one of his potential or actual selves” (p. 188). Sport holds the kind of potential to help some players experience this kind of realization – an understanding of how the athlete feels about and interacts with the sport. There is mystery here in the sense that this potential does not touch every athlete in the same way.

Anderson and Lally (2004), in their article focused on endurance sport, contend that “practices are both deliberate and chosen” (p. 18). How do we make these decisions, they wonder? To answer this, Anderson and Lally point towards James’ essay, “The Will to Believe” and write:

When reason cannot tell us definitively what to do, we should allow what he [James] calls our ‘passional nature’ into the equation. It is at this juncture that endurance practices gain existential purchase in our lives. We began, as did James, by willing a belief – that is, by believing that these endurance practices, strange as they initially seem to some, would have some pay-off in the making of our lives. We entered the practices without guarantees, but we each had a sense – a Bergsonian intuition – or perhaps a perception of possibilities.” (p. 18)

Anderson and Lally write about decisions they made as adults. As such, they recognized that the endurance sport practice could serve as a potential vehicle towards an improved and awakened self. They understood that the daily commitment to running, biking, and swimming helped moved them, in small steps, towards an improved self that could potentially extend to other areas of life as well. Making decisions about commitment to sport at an adult age, we have the opportunity to reflect on our lives (in ways different than children), recognizing those moments of our narrative when we have not lived at our best, and that practices such as endurance sport might then serve this purpose.

Conversely, children and youth who commit to practices are at a different stage of life. They certainly lack the depth of experiences that an adult has encountered over the course of many years. Making decisions, and determining one’s commitment to sport, differ in terms of age and maturity level. The middle-school athlete who faces a decision regarding specialization is at a much different place in life, as compared with a twenty-something college graduate. The latter is more mature and potentially more informed as to the potential risk and gain of the respective sport commitment. There is also a difference between participating in endurance sport as a solo athlete, as compared with a youth-sport athlete trying out for a high school or travel, select team where the prospect of being cut, or not selected, raises the stakes even higher.

Regardless of the timing of youth sport commitment to one sport, regardless of how well the individual has thought through the decision, regardless of how wise the counsel he or she has received, commitment remains a tenuous and, at times, precipitous endeavor. As Bugbee (1999) explains, “Decision can not be boiled down to informed choice. The frontier on which each one of us stands, and beyond which each one of us commits himself in action, is an incorrigible feature of the situation of a man who acts” (p. 66). Yes, specialization does involve a certain degree of processing, a level of deliberating over possible options, using reason to determine best steps. Yet the decision to specialize must necessarily happen in the absence of any absolute certainty – the decision does not rest on informed choice alone. This is what James, and Bugbee, sought to explain. Coaches play a part in helping guide and counsel athletes through this difficult yet promising terrain, making themselves available for conversation, closely watching, listening and attending to the athletes and the practice community.

Could committing to one specific sport be constitutive of the life-building James has in mind? In an 1870 journal entry, James wrote: “Life shall [be built in] doing and suffering and creating” (in Stuhr,

1987, p. 96). This type of commitment to one particular human project, in our case a single sport, potentially exemplifies that kind of life narrative James had in mind – the “doing and suffering and creating.” Building one’s narrative through dedication to one particular sport is indicative of this process. The athlete who dedicates him or herself to basketball in middle school takes on the requisite challenges, faces suffering in spades, and yet creates not only an aesthetically pleasing jump shot but, more importantly, in the phrasing of James, a “life of significance.”

In sum, youth sport specialization is indeed a complex process, one that hinges on “getting to maybe.” As is the case with any attempt to bring about change – be that on the societal or personal level – we have no absolute guarantee that our efforts will bear fruit. Rather than bemoan this fact, or allow this uncertainty to paralyze us, it is better to move in the direction of a “maybe.” In this way, following contemporary writers (e.g., Westley, Zimmerman & Patton; 2007) and those from earlier times (e.g., James, 1892), it is possible to accept or even embrace uncertainty that comes through decisions surrounding youth sport specialization. Choosing to focus on one particular pursuit – at the expense of all other available options – for a certain period of time – can be incredibly rich and meaningful, despite, and because of, the tremendous risk and uncertainty involved.

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