

HOW DO YOU GET BETTER? PLAY OTHER SPORTS



Darryl Nelson said it's rare that he sees a player enter USA Hockey's National Team Development Program who strictly played only hockey.

Yes, even the country's top teenagers played multiple sports while growing up.

Nelson is the strength and conditioning coach for the NTDP and also works with Advantage Strength and Conditioning, stationed at the Ann Arbor Ice Cube.

While many parents and players think playing hockey year-round is the way to go for becoming a better player, Nelson points to the opposite.

"Well-rounded athletes are always great," Nelson said. "I guess never say 100-percent, but I think almost all our players are multi-sport athletes when they come into the National Team Development Program. Very few kids specialize in hockey and then become that good. Cam Fowler and Reid Boucher played here. They were all-star baseball players. We had all kinds of kids, players like Brady Skjei, he was a stand-out football player, Andy Copp I think has the state record in Michigan for passing

yards in football. The examples are endless. If you went through an NHL roster, 90 percent of the guys on every team were multi-sport athletes until they were 17, 18 years old."

With travel teams playing upward of 80 games per season and then spring hockey beginning shortly after the fall season ends, kids are vulnerable to burning out.

"I think the other thing, too, is the way to not like something is to have it all the time," Nelson said. "If you had chocolate cake every day, how much would you like chocolate cake? Time away actually increases your motivation I think. So to take a few weeks or even a couple months off hockey in the spring and summer is great... Our version with the National Team Development Program of spring hockey is great because we don't play games. The hockey is all about practice, it's all about reps, it's all about handling pucks, it's all about skating. It's not playing a game where you might have the puck for 30 seconds in two hours. You practice for an hour, you have the puck for 40 minutes."

Brian Sipotz is the owner of Advantage Strength and Conditioning and a certified strength and conditioning specialist. He said kids can simply play "anything that's going to make them an athlete," citing the valuable skills they learn that translate back to hockey.

"Anything where they get out and they're active and they're being athletes and they're learning how to move their body, that's really beneficial, too," Sipotz said. "Say you go play pickup basketball as a summertime activity. You're learning things like spatial awareness, you're learning give-and-go, you're learning how to get open for people. Everyone talks about the 10,000 hours toward mastering a sport. You don't have to play hockey to get that. You don't have to be on the ice all summer. In fact, you shouldn't be on the ice all summer. You should be working on things that are going to make you athletic, things that are going to help you read the game, understand the game, how people move off each other and where you can be in a good position to get the ball or get the puck. All those are things you develop just like people are trying to return to playing more pond hockey and just unstructured play. You get that through other sports, too."

With how expensive hockey season already is, parents don't need to break the bank with these other sports, either.

"I think a big misconception, maybe by the players but also by the parents is that you say, 'Oh you should play multiple sports' and they go, 'Oh well shoot, I'm paying for all this travel hockey and now we've gotta go play AAU baseball and something else.' It doesn't have to be AAU baseball," Nelson said. "It can just be local baseball, it can just be the lowest level league, it doesn't have to be a grand. People are... whatever it is, 'Keep up with the Joneses' or they want a status symbol or something like that. Those are adult values. Kids don't need that."

Sipotz and Nelson said having parents educate themselves and establish early on that hockey season is separate from spring and summer will go a long way.

"One thing is being educated and knowledgeable about the fact that playing other sports is gonna make you a better athlete and ultimately a better hockey player in the end," Nelson said.

"It's about starting early with your kids, letting them know that this is hockey season, spring is another season, summer is another season," Sipotz said. "That's the way we set it up with our kids where, 'You love that? Great, look forward to it next fall, next winter.' And then a lot of times, too, people will say, 'Well my kid loves hockey. There's no way he'll step away!' Well, lacrosse is a lot like hockey. Give that a shot. A lot of times kids like the competition, so they're gonna like that competition just as well in another sport if that's what they really like. It's just about trying different things until you try something else that works."

- STEFAN KUBUS

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