

3 Ways to Improve Your Athlete's Physical Literacy

By David Benzel



As an adult...

- Do you ever wish you were more athletically confident?
- Is it hard for you to make physical activity a priority in your life?
- Are you out of your comfort zone participating in sports?

If you answered yes to these questions, then it's possible you never FULLY developed your physical literacy.

Coined by Margaret Whitehead, "[physical literacy](#)" refers to:

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“the motivation, confidence, physical competence, understanding and knowledge to maintain physical activity at an individually appropriate level, throughout life.”

As you would imagine, becoming physically literate starts early in life when kids are exposed to fundamental movements – things like running, skipping, jumping, catching, kicking, sliding, and striking.

Involvement in youth sports then builds upon these basics.

But it does not end there.

Choices that you and your athlete make during the middle school and high school years can impact their individual journey, toward cultivating lifelong physical literacy.

Here are 3 ways to keep them on the right track.

1) Play Multiple Sports

With sports clinics, travel teams, and one-on-one coaching, specialization in sports seems to be happening at younger and younger ages.

Parents dreaming of full sports scholarships are dropping significant resources into helping their athlete become REALLY good at that one sport.

However, a [study](#) released just last year at the AOSSM (American Orthopedic Society for Sports Medicine) annual meeting, gives compelling evidence against this approach.

In a nutshell, “specialization at a very young age does NOT increase the likelihood of an athlete achieving elite status within her sport.” And it puts her at risk for overuse injuries.

More often than not, colleges are now looking to recruit multi-sport athletes over their single-sport counterparts because their overall athleticism is at a higher level.

Even more fascinating, according to the study, ONLY 22.3% of the professional athletes that were asked, said they would have their children specialize in just one sport.

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2) Seek Body Balance

Some sports lend themselves to an imbalance in the body. And this is especially likely if your athlete only does a single sport.

The imbalance may be easy to see, such as in:

- Water-skiers who are really strong at pulling but not pushing
- Runners that have strong legs but no upper-body strength
- Swimmers with poor posture
- Soccer players with weak glutes and hamstrings or restricted ankle mobility
- Baseball players with a depressed shoulder girdle

And you can't ignore these imbalances when improving physical literacy is the goal.



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This is yet another argument for playing multiple sports. Participating in different activities strengthens areas of weakness and more importantly wards off overuse injuries.

Another option would be to do the specific movements that offset an imbalance.

For example, a runner that engages in upper body strength-building can offset his imbalance.

Teaching an athlete to have body awareness also enables him to be cognizant when an imbalance starts to show itself. Yoga can help in this regard.

3) Take A Season Off

Let's be honest. Taking a season off may sound scary when you know that some of your rivals are still playing, training, and working on skills.

But this is when it is critical to look at the bigger picture – which should be lifelong physical activity.

As a parent, you need to trust the process. Research shows that taking a season off improves performance.

Mental fatigue will usually show up in your athlete even quicker than physical fatigue. And taking a season off allows your child's body AND mind to recover from the rigors of training.

You can still encourage daily physical activity, but this is the time to focus on fun and a more relaxed approach.

Final Thoughts

Developing your child's physical literacy should be viewed through the lens of a lifetime. Staying focused on just "making them a star" robs them of the future joy and health benefits that come to a confident, knowledgeable, and physically engaged adult.

David Benzel is the Founder and Executive Director of [Growing Champions for Life, Inc.](http://GrowingChampionsforLife.com), which provides parents and coaches with practical tools & positive strategies for helping athletes reach their full potential while enjoying the youth sport experience. David is also the author of *"From Chump to Champ - How Individuals Go From Good to Great"* www.growingchampionsforlife.com