

Early Specialization in Youth Sports with Dr. Neeru Jayanthi

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Hi, I'm Irina Falconi, WTA tour player, and you're listening to compete like a champion.

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J: Welcome to compete like a champion. You're here with Dr. Larry Lauer, mental skills specialist, and coach Johnny Parkes with USTA Player Development. Today we've got a very special guest on, Neeru Jayanthi who is uh, Director of Emory sports medicine research and education. Neeru, welcome to the podcast.

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N: Hey Johnny, how are you doing? Happy new year.

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J: Happy new year. Happy new year. Yeah, we've been going back and forth trying to get some, trying to get some guests on the podcast and what you're one of the first people that came to my mind, especially as I'm in the youth space and you do a lot of great work researching early specialization and physical injuries, uh, as well as many other things. But maybe, you know, before we kick off here, you could give our listeners a sense of what it is that you do and your strong interest in tennis and where all that comes from.

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N: Sure. Yeah. Maybe I should start with saying I'm a tennis player and I'm a doctor on the side. And so I kind of, you know, while I do a lot with youth sport, tennis is definitely the most important sport for me. And I still compete and play and, and run a USTA team myself and, but, uh, you know, all young athletes are important and we have to figure out a way to make it work. But I, I got started actually with a lot of these issues with athlete development, looking at hundreds and hundreds of young junior USTA rank tennis players, you know, about 15 years ago and just looked at their patterns of training and what, what made them succeed, what made them get into a little bit of trouble with injuries and whether they should play a single sport or not. And then that kind of turned into finding thousands of young athletes for similar things cause people want to extrapolate that information into other sports. And I thought that it would be kind of a brief tour into this, this concept. But then 15 years later it's been, it's exploded. I mean, gosh, I've had probably at least 150 media requests that different varieties, you name it, podcast publications and, and I think we still have a lot of work to do to help continue educating people on what's the appropriate athlete development model. So that's why I'm always eager to get on and help, you know, do things like this to talk to parents and coaches and anyone who kind of can influence these kids.

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J: That's awesome. So, so out of a lot of the findings of your research, what trends were you seeing, uh, and maybe the, the causes you're able to identify?

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N: Yeah. You know, I think we, let's talk about this, we'll have a discussion today cause we have the right people on today. Talk about two parts. There's the negative consequences of athlete development and the positive consequences.

So like we're still trying to get kids to get better at tennis and be really good. We want some to be really good and compete at the highest level, but we don't want to have all the bad consequences, which are injuries, mental health issues, and then quitting or having a terrible experience. So what we did find, which has been, you know, kind of confirmed with the other studies is we were probably the first to report the potential risk of just having an injury being more likely if you played a single sport versus multiple sport. And as we did more studies, we found that association to be stronger and stronger where it was actually the risk of playing intensely in a single sport more than eight months a year, basically full time and quitting all your other sport, particularly at a young age led to a higher rate, like more than double your risk of serious overuse injuries and that's keeping kids out for one month, two months, three months or longer. And then other folks, other researchers found similar results and you know, use the same definitions that we've done. And since then, now we've certainly found a lot from injury point of view suggesting that, you know, maybe it's not the best idea to take most young people, young tennis players for example, decide not to do any other sport and then expect that over a 10 year period from like 8 to 18 that they're going to have a positive outcome from athlete development. And also from a, from an injury risk point of view.

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L: Neeru what is your definition of specialization?

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N: Yeah, we've gone back and forth quite a bit on getting a good research definition. We just published an editorial on just that exact question, but let's try and make it simple for a parent. Is that if you ask your child are they choosing one sport as their main sport or do they say it's multiple sports? So that's the first question. And then the second question is do they quit all of their sports so they can just focus on that one sport. And the third question is, do they train in a single sport and competing single sport more than eight months a year? So essentially year-round. And if they are yes to all three of those and then that's what we call highly specialized. If there are two out of three, they're moderately specialized and if they're one out of three or zero out of three then they're, they have a low degree of specialization

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J: Yeah, that's, that's pretty interesting because I think in the tennis world, I think most would have at least one of those, you know, juniors that are starting to get on that competitive pathway so to speak. I think most junior tennis players, so I guess maybe when you're looking at the juniors getting into tennis, knowing that it's a year round sport, what might be some guidelines for parents that words provide those healthier outcomes, more positive experiences that you're talking about.

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N: Right. And so, you're right Johnny, the culture is that tennis is a year round sport and I agree that the rate of highly specialized tennis players is extremely, is one of the highest sports. It's actually on par with gymnastics and other, you know, high intense training sports. The majority of them are saying yes to all three of those things. And that's a high performance kid. So the first question I ask is, does that have to be the case? Does it have to be the case for a 10 and

12-year-old? It is currently. And so what can we or USTA really do to help change that culture so that it's not an automatic like, well you want to do tennis and you're 10 years old, now you have to do it year round. And so I think that'll make it more inviting. And I know we already have a lot of things going on with USTA and net generation. There's a lot of ways to make that initial kind of reaction, not just a full time commitment. So, but if you do, let's say you're that performance kid and you're, you're talking about full time training, which we have a lot of them. I'm in Atlanta and we have a lot of, we partner with a lot of the academies and there are a lot of full time kids and they're going for it. Well, they work with us and they think they do a pretty good job of monitoring. So one of things is I think simply saying, Larry, you know what Dr. Lauer can talk more about is just the mental health and staying happy and staying motivated, and checking your athlete every day. Are you enjoying this, do you have the desire to train again today and train for this tournament? And just ask simple questions like, are you having fun? And maybe, and he's an expert in this area and so maybe he has different tools to do that, but that's some of the things I ask whenever I see a kid, I say, are you having fun? Do you want to do this? And then we have some simple rules about monitoring load and some of them are volume dependent. In other words, we'd look at an easy one, it's how many hours a week you train. And so we had some data that, that I, I like to call my Ali Steven's rule, he's a former, I mean he's a friend, unfortunately died of cancer. But he always told me, you know, he's a great, great teaching pro and you know, just a great person. They always told me many years ago about 12 years ago or more that he always liked to advise doing less hours per week than your age. But then we studied it and looked at it over about 1200 athletes and it was true that if you did that, if you exceeded your number of hours per week versus your age, you are much more likely to have serious overuse injuries. So if you have a 12 year old doing 15 or 16 hours, it seems excessive. And if you have, you know, a 16 year old, you know, doing 20 hours is probably, you know, it seems excessive as well. So, so that was one of the simplest guidelines. And then I call them the high risk areas. When you are a performance athlete and a tennis athlete, there are certain areas that you gotta just, it's hard to ignore. You can push through a quad strain and you know, some muscle injuries and maybe you have a simple ankle sprain and you're trying to push through and get back here in a match and, but when you have pain in the low back and the elbow or pain in the shoulder, particularly if you're not what we call fully skeletally mature, you're still developing. You don't want to sit around with those longer than a week and still push through it. Those are kind of the high risk areas. And it's those kids that kind of don't realize it. They call it tightness, they call it soreness. Those are the ones that kind of run into this serious overuse injury problem. And then they miss long, long periods of time and it's hard to recover from those.

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L: So for the parents and coaches out there Neeru, you would say if something's going on in the back, elbow, shoulder for a week, that's something that needs to get checked out and you need to rest.

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N: Correct. Yeah. And you know, as a coach, you know, I'll give simple things. You know, I do a lot of, we do conferences, we kind of talked to the coaches about what are the things to look out for. So if you come in, if you're going into a tournament and you can't lean back without pain, then the likelihood you'll be successful and not develop a stress injury in the back is not good, right? If you're already going to a tournament. So just check simple things, you checked to make sure you can lean back and have a pain free range of motion in your back, and you take your elbow, that you can straighten it out and bend it without pain and swing your racket without pain and for your shoulder as well too. So if you're coming in, particularly as a developing kid, like a 12,13 year old and you're having pain doing those simple things, those are already, that's the smoke before the fire. So yeah, I really encourage, you know, start by saying, Hey, maybe a competitive environment isn't the right place. And if they go on for a week or longer, we should probably see you for that.

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J: We often talk about with athletes that when we're training them that the physical and the mental, uh, interconnected, interrelated, the harder we push them, the tougher they'll get or yeah, the more physically diverse they are, the more, the more mentally diverse and healthy they can be. So maybe, you know, question to both of you Larry and Neeru here, we start to see these injuries build up and if the physicals connect to the mental, so as all these injuries tend to occur, if we don't stop and take some rest, we, you know, you've just labeled there some of the physical consequences, injury. But maybe let's, you know, Larry, if you could expand on those, the mental signs to look out for because you often see when kids are pushing through injury, they tend to hide it. Fear of missing out the tournaments they want to play. They don't want to tell their coach they're injured because they do want to play. They got pressure to play this and that, do this and that from multiple sources. How does that over time, you know, not only just break down the physical side like we talked about, but the mental?

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L: Well I think it's a great question and often when talk about specialization, we focus on the physical side and the the injury side of it, which is very important, but also the as Neeru pointed out, the mental, the emotional that you know, when you're doing something that either you're very stressed about or you don't want to do and when you're being forced to play or just through expectations, I think that really pays a toll on the person. You think about elevated stress over time, okay, is not good. Stress is fine and Nehru can speak to this as well, but elevated stress over time is not good for us and that stress, not only is it creating a over-focus on tennis and maybe on results and you start making some poor decisions about scheduling, about rest and recovery of these things which will have effect on your body, but also that elevated stress over time is activating your muscles. So there's a mind-body connection and you have too much activation in those muscles over time. That can also lead to issues physically. So the body and the mind are inevitably connected. And so if I'm emotionally stressed, if I'm anxious, that will have effect on my body. I might be carrying around too much tension that that could lead to injury. We've seen that lead to more injuries as well as people getting sick. And then, you know, at

the end of the day, as we talked about, this thing should be fun and if you really want to be able to see it through from, you know, 8 until hopefully, you know, like us, we still play, well, you guys more than me, but you gotta enjoy it. And that stress over time really takes its toll and you start to see players become stale where they're not as interested in training. They lack energy. And then you start to see down this road a burnout depersonalizing from things that used to be important, like results, their development and things they're working on in their game. They feel less control over what's happening. Like, well, my effort doesn't lead me anywhere anyway, so why would I try? So you see this kind of disappointment and it can lead to other mental health issues like anxiety issues like depression. So not saying that every kid that specializes is going to have these issues, but there's certainly things to look out for and it all works back to, is this something that the kid wants to do? And is it the right time for it?

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J: That's a great point. And you know, it seems like the way the sport, I don't think it's just tennis culture, but sports culture in general has created this notion that it's in the public mind or in the public eyes now that playing one sport as early as possible and playing lots of it is the formula to either playing professionally or a college scholarship and wherever this has come from, it's a misinterpretation of Anders Ericsson's 10,000 hour rule, that was sort of became pop culture in Malcolm Gladwell's book outliers and then now it seems like the shift, Neeru, has gone from early specialization, this \$10,000 rule that was way taken out of context to now this notion that a lot of sports governing bodies are jumping on, which is sports sampling. And maybe you can talk to us a little bit about that, the what sports sampling is and the benefits of that.

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N: Yeah, and thanks Johnny, we should separate phenoms from reality, right? You're always going to have an exception. You're going to have phenoms who could do everything. They're completely resilient. And you know, maybe use Tiger Woods as an example and you know, some people like to use the Williams sisters and you know, how many of those do you get? Those are generational, right? So you have to, and even in Coco you can, you know, talk about an early phenom, but she had other sports that she was involved in. But, let's take out phenoms and talk about what most of our children are going through, which is being normal kids, who want to participate and compete and try to get the best as they can. And so when we look at it, even from the national governing body point of view and we look at the science behind it, we did what's called a systematic review of all of the articles that have been published about whether specializing improves performance or not. And there was 22 articles to date and published in the number one sports medicine journal in the world. And we found exactly zero articles that showed a benefit and this is looking at large samples including Olympic athletes, medalist, non-medalist, elite level. And so overall there is actually no evidence that there's a benefit to doing it, but you will get examples, so there may be some situations where it's the same. Now we know that the risk is higher if you specialize. And then the difference is that we don't have an isolate sample of just tennis players. We're currently doing a study and actually invite anyone who would like to, uh, to participate in it, we're following junior tennis players for a couple of years and seeing how much is

necessary, which kids are more successful with these types of trading patterns. But we don't have it specifically in tennis. So why do we rely on tennis? Well, it's already been going on for many years. And so we kind of claim to the current culture and say, well, Hey, you know, I just know of a lot of people who have just trained a lot and, and then that may be successful. You increase your risk of injury, increase your risk of mental health issues and burnout, but you may be successful. What if we propose that there is an alternative to doing that? So let's say you decided at 8 you were going to train and specialize only in tennis and then pretty soon after that play year round and train and do tournaments. Well, you've added four years probably of exposure to your kid. You know, if you didn't wait until 12 or so, tried some sampling before. Then all of that environment, which not everyone has a Larry Lauer around them to support them if there's problems or maybe myself from an injury point of view and most kids don't have that luxury of having like a USTA player development environment where they could take these kids and take them through that environment because they have so many resources and that's what most kids are going through. So you've just basically aged them four years in my opinion. And so we have to look at it from what's best for that kid, especially that 8 to 12 to maybe even 13 or 14 in some other situations, but at least 8 to 12 and ask ourselves what is best for that kid so that when they are 16-18, are they in better physical shape, are they a better player and are they still mentally prepared to continue on with the sport? Or they're already pretty much at their last, you know, in their last legs mentally and physically by then.

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L: Those are great points. And I've thought in my mind about this guy, so I don't know if this is, there's no fact for this, but you look at the old data from Michigan State university that many players move away from their primary sport at age 13, right? It was like 75% of kids leave their primary sport at age 13. It's my belief that, and going off of what you're talking about Neeru is that, let's say you started at 6, uh, at 7 and now you've had 6, 7 years where this is all that you've done and you do it year round. Now, if you had started that at age 12 or 14, when you're a little bit more mature and older and now you have that 6, 7 years and you're 20, 21, you have a better understanding of the difference between, you know, what's expected of you from others and what you want and in many other things what really you value in your life. But think about it, you started out six or seven and now you're age 13, you have no capacity, no understanding of what it is you want for the rest of your life. What do you, what do you want until you're 30 or 35, right? And so kids are in these environments for many years, many hours, many weeks. And they get to a point where naturally, like I would like to do something different. I still want to move and I want to be active, but I want to do something different because I'm tired of being in this environment. And then I usually get sparked by a bad coach or a bad experience or experiences. So I don't want you guys thinking about that, but I think when you said, Neeru, about kind of, you're moving the clock up a little bit, right? I mean, when you, when you start early, that early specialization where now it's almost like you're on the clock and you know, kids are having to make these decisions earlier, whether it's because of injury or mentally, emotionally they get, they just get burned out on what they're doing.

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J: Well, and they're not in a stage in their growth and maturation to be able to process all that to make really logical, rational decisions, right?

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L: Correct.

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J: And so if they're feeling the pressure that to play from either, you know, a parent or a coach and then that's put on themselves, now they feel the pressure within themselves to keep going because they've shown themselves they have a certain talent level, so to speak. They feel that they have nothing else to do. So they go, Oh, well I'm really good at this. Now I should only do this, right? You know, cause I'm really good at it. Why should I go do something else that I'm not as good at? Right. And I think the point here is, and you know again coming back to a little bit of the sports sampling, which is a lot of the messaging getting out there is, especially within tennis, you know, the messaging coming out is, and you know you can jump in anytime here, correct me if I'm wrong, but multi-sport participation is obviously very good and it's obviously very good. However, if you are your primary sport, you like to play a lot of it, there's no reasons why you can't have multi-sport experiences alongside it. And I think the word I like to use here is a diversity of experiences because the diversity of experiences with an ever changing and changeable mind is inevitably going to keep that mind healthy because of the different challenges, the new nuances and not just that complete repetition. We talk about the injuries through early specialization. Say with the shoulder, the shoulder gets burnt out from doing the same rep over and over, well the mind's the same. The mind's getting the same reps and the same experience over and over and over and over until it inevitably in quite a lot of people breaks. But if we, if we're supplying that experience in the primary sport, that couples it with the sport sampling and bringing that either to the tennis programming or they do find times in their schedule that they can go and play other sports and do take that little break away from tennis throughout the week somewhere, then that is a way that might be of benefit. But in an ideal world, we want the child to be able to take a little bit of time away from that primary sport in order to sample these other sports.

[19:13](#)

L: Correct. Because it's not just the one sport, it's the amount of time that you're putting into that one sport, right? So even if you're moving into something else. Now, what are your thoughts, Neeru? We've been going off here for a little bit.

[19:23](#)

N: No, I 100% agree with you and I have a, you know, a couple of try to do quotes and I love the way you guys are saying this because we're talking to tennis players and tennis parents. It's different. Football, there isn't a specialization problem, they brag about it in the NFL and tennis is one of the problem or one of the areas where you know, there is a perceived benefit and maybe there is of, you know, being a fulltime kid and you get a college scholarship and a lot of kids who've gone down that pathway. But, so I asked, and was just on a podcast earlier with a former professional baseball player. I said, we ask young athletes of all sports, but particularly in tennis, 100% of effort, nearly 100% of the year. We ask 100% of effort from college and professional athletes for about eight months of the year. And particularly

professional athletes, they take several months off to just, you know, recharge and take care of their body. And so...

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L: And the MBA, have rest days now, right Neeru? They take rest days in the MBA. Sorry.

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N: Right. Exactly. There's a lot of load monitoring. So I ask, when I give talks to USTA juniors, I say if we put in the same amount of effort to try to get your child to be a top level 14 or 16 or 18 year old tennis player as we did to saying, I want to do everything I can so that when my kid is 25 they're still playing tennis or when they're 30 they're still playing tennis, I think we'd see a different landscape. If I asked the parents to think about that as they're going through this process and say, what is the goal? It's very easy to look at that short term goal and then start shaping your whole, your time management, your involvement into the sport, to have a 14 year old or 6 year old goal, rather than saying, what do I want my kid to be doing at 25 because the likelihood that they're still in, from a USTA perspective. Look, I'm turning 50 in a couple of years and I'm still captain my 5.0 team and I love competing. Like I told you guys before the call, you know I love competing against the 19 year olds who played Academy tennis and you know beating them in three sets.

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L: I knew you were going to get that in somehow.

[21:16](#)

N: Yeah, I had to throw that plug in there, I had to throw that plug in there.

[21:18](#)

L: You're going to have to tell the rest of it. You can't move today though. You have to tell the whole story.

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N: It took me about two days to start walking normally again, but you know I have competitive [inaudible] [inaudible], but why is that? Because we want people to have a longterm plan for tennis. And so I think, you know, we have to acknowledge, and you guys do obviously, and you guys are completely in the player development, a world of obviously the highest level athletes, but there is a group of people who need to go for it and take some risk, but they have the right support to do it and they're working on athlete development skills. People may not realize that are offsetting some of these risks and as they get older, and that's a very narrow niche of athletes. For the majority of athletes, you know, let's just see, like Johnny said, let's just take, can you buy us three, four or five years of just maybe for those months that you just have an opportunity to sample and do other things and come back to tennis. USA hockey did that and they had phenomenal results. And so if we can just encourage that and make a culture of, Hey, when you're young it's okay, do some tennis but go away for a while and do some other stuff. But then we'll be more excited. You'll come back with new energy, new athletic skills, a fresher perspective and maybe everyone, you know, we have, all parents read that book, David Epstein wrote the Range. So we do have a variety of skillsets both mentally and physically. And we're not asking you, you have to specialize at some point, as we all know in tennis at some point you have to specialize. It's not a question of if, it's a question of

when and is that number 8, 10, 12, 14? So what is that number? So we looked at these numbers with WTM. I like to share only one piece of data through WT legal. We looked at the top 250 players in the world and we looked at their age of specialization and we found there was no difference between young, early specializers and specializers who, who waited a little bit longer as far as their ranking. It didn't influence whether they're going to be top 10, top 50, top 100 and that's the one piece of data I'm allowed to present from that dataset. And what it tells you that there are two pathways and you can specialize. But also think of the player support teams and the resources and the athlete development programs that a WTA player has versus your 12, 13, 14 year old if you do decide to specialize early. So the resources are just not the same. And again, that's a very, those are professional tennis players. It's a very small group of incredibly resilient athletes. And so my own kids are not even close to that resilient. So I have a little rule when I take my kids out to the tennis courts, I stop playing with them before they want to stop. I actually say, nope, we're done. And I want to keep them hungry cause then they go, no, I want to do five more. And I go, nope, that's it. Here, let's pack it up. So that they never feel like it's, I want them to tell me to start, but I want to be able to stop so that I never get past that threshold of like, why am I still here on the court? And so, you know, just little things like that, but, and just have a longterm plan. I love, Johnny, if we could keep messaging what you said is just give us a little bit of variety of experiences, especially when you're younger. If we can get maybe four more years of that at least, you know, kind of incorporate into the general experience of a tennis player. And for the high performance kid. You know there are kids who are going to be 14, 15, 16, we want tennis to be inviting to those kids who just still want to play like we do with our league matches once a week, play a match once a week and maybe play, you know, another time during the week every now and then and maybe take a season or two off during the year. And we still want to encourage it because guess what, those people are much more likely to play as an adult.

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J: Well and then if they play they might get their kids into it.

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N: Absolutely.

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L: True. Now I think there's, I think it's good to talk to the people who are making these decisions at a young age and that's the parents and I think they get confronted with a couple things. One is that you want to develop some kind of expertise in your children. Now that might be in math or science and it might be in tennis and it might be in another sport or music, but it seems to be this, this rush to develop expertise in children. That's part of the a societal trend at least in the US. We'll say and then this, then on top of that is this idea that, okay, if I'm not doing that, then I'm not doing my job as a parent and therefore I fall in this trap of more is more because I need this as much or more than my kid needs this. I need them to be successful in something because that says that I. As a parent, did my job. I feel good about myself as a parent. Now, one of the other issues kind of embedded in this is that we saw this in our parent research, player research about a decade ago, over like 15 years ago, is that parents, and

you're pointing this out, Johnny, they're trying, they will sample early, but they're sampling from the philosophy of, I'm trying to find a sport that my child's talented in, that they show talent in. And then as soon as we find that, we're stopping everything else, we're putting all of our eggs in that basket, right? So not really truly sampling. What they're doing is they're kind of talent-identifying. And trust me, if scouts aren't good at it, your everyday parents are going to be even worse at it. Right? So I mean these are some of the things that we see. I don't know what you see, you probably get to interact with a number of young tennis players and their parents and coaches. Do you see some of these things, some of these pressures that the parents are feeling.

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N: They all feel, and it's kind of all cycles around with each other and I'll start by saying I think the majority of coaches and parents and kids all want to do the right thing. It's just that, how is that quote unquote right thing being communicated so that we're all on the same wavelength and I don't know that we're all necessarily on the same wavelength because in different pockets and pockets, you know, they're full time academies and coaches who are pushing to just do tennis and they say, yeah, they can do multi-sports, but that's for those weak kids. And you know, they're not going to get the rankings, they're not going to be as good and they may be getting different messages and there's some great coaches who are like, no, I want you to become an athlete first and I want you to be healthy and I want you, I want to encourage this and let's do shared decision making. Similarly with parents, some of the best tennis parents are the ones who were the best tennis players before or the best athlete because they know that, you know, they know what it takes and it doesn't have to start at six or seven continuously. And so they're the best parents. And so sometimes the parents, maybe it's just an educational component and I don't want it to be, I've always, you know, I've had a lot of conversations with USTA, kind of, you know, on this athlete development model. If I put on USTA, I guess part of sports science, we don't want to be paternalistic and say you're doing it wrong. You know, and this is how you should do it. And you know, it's not that, it's actually, it's a process I think of helping explain, look, let's see what the benefits of a different model is compared to what you're currently doing and see and help you choose. Just like anything, just like educational decisions and other things like that. And I think, not saying it's bad or good and I'm cautious cause I'm always asked to speak on the negative effects of early sports specialization, all these other things, but we've done studies where there are a good quality of life in specialized athletes, but where did that come from? It's from supportive parents. We have a list of the positive qualities and they don't emphasize winning. They're not result oriented. The kids are self-driven and actually, the kids are resilient. And so I have two kids. One is resilient with sports and activities. One is not. So I can tell you now that the one that is not we, we are very slow to put them in an environment that we're worried about him having a negative experience. And particularly I'm concerned from tennis. So I really need to make sure it's a really good supportive, positive environment. So we have to kind of value kids differently. And it's a big educational thing. And I keep going back saying it's not a bad or good thing. It's a process of changing the culture so that the other options become more acceptable.

[28:26](#)

J: And to go along with that. That's a really good point. You know, we just finished preseason up here December at the campus and we had a lot of our, you know, top US players here and I was able to catch a little conversation with some of them and ask them. And I basically just asked them about their sports experiences when they were kids. And a lot of them said, yeah, they played a lot of tennis, but you know, I also did basketball, I also did football and I also did all these other things. So it's, you know, you can do these things and not worry that, Oh my gosh, we're missing out. We are falling behind or whatever it may be. Because as you mentioned, you know, it has no effect, like you said, from the WTA study, it has no effect, you know, down the road really. So there's those different paths, but if we're seeing in even our top players now, American players, and then obviously you see a lot of cases from all over the world and you know, enough examples from the top three in the men's game with uh, with Roger and Novak and Rafa. And I think everyone at this point knows the other sports that they played. You know, the, this is actually a helpful thing. This is actually, you know, not that we want to say that there is a formula, there is no magic goal, there's no formula. There's just a process like you said. But if part of the equation is that we're seeing in top players that they did other things when they were kids 12 and under, 13 and under, then surely we need to take note of that. That is part of the equation that we need to provide those experiences, not only just for their general health and well-being, but if those goals from the child is to want to play tennis down the road, then we need to be able to supply these experiences for our kids, because as parents or coaches, we know that A. first and foremost, this is going to be a healthy positive experience for them in whatever they do, and B. yes, okay, if they decide to pursue tennis down the road, this is actually something that's going to really help them. And I think that's the positive messaging we need to get across here is that, you know, taking away those things because we think that's not part of a minor part of the formula is probably the wrong type of thinking. But again, in terms of the process and what we're trying to deliver, there's many different areas that we can go down very different paths to kind of reach the goals set hopefully by the child.

[30:31](#)

L: Well, and that's an important point there. Yeah, go ahead Neeru.

[30:33](#)

N: No, no, no. One last thing is I think in our, you know, Johnny had emailed before about, you know, talking about this specialized sampling kind of model and I want to just talk a little bit about that. Cause it kind of goes along with what you're saying Johnny. If you want to be a high level tennis player, let's not kid ourselves, you have to put in hours. It's a technical sport and there's, there's a lot of strategy, there's a lot of reasons to be on the court for long periods of time. And so it's acquired over time and it doesn't have to be 100%, you know, for 10 years in a row, probably not. But you have to put in the hours. So a specialized sampling model is actually in coaches' hands. So what do I do? Tell my tournament kid to just leave for four months and then not have any kids. And you know, so one model that was successful in football and there was a study that looked at the cumulation of hours where you would focus on one sport and these are hopefully a little bit older kids. But let's say you have a 12,

13, 14, 15 year old kid and then during that time period though, there were periods of time where they would sample a variety of activities that were not necessarily the sport within that same club or environment. So like if you were running an Academy, your kids are still in the Academy, but maybe you have your intense training long days on Monday, Wednesday, Fridays, but Tuesdays and Thursdays were low volume and then they would do other activities that would help them. And that would be, you know, by that age, play soccer or basketball or do just do other things. It helps them from an athlete development point of view with the mental rest and, but they're accumulating hours of athlete development. And then so the accumulation of total hours is still important in those groups that did that were defined as elite athletes. And so, you know, I think we have to start exploring, cause there's a business model, you have to understand that coaches have a business model too. They can't just tell their kids to leave. And so we have to acknowledge that. We have to have a some sort of solution. That's one of the solutions I've always thought. And also self-directed free play and you know, organized coaching environment is where we get a little trouble, but you know, when we allow kids to choose, let's say, again, you have three days a week of it, you know, more intense training and two days a week is you know, maybe it's self directed for some of the kids where they say you can just do match play or do your own drills or do something. Just come out. But if you need to rest and recover, you have other stuff going on, maybe you're playing another sport or something like that, you don't have to show up. And so give them some, the child, some direction in the amount invested into their experiences rather than saying, you know, you have to do here, our Academy runs from 12-4, five days a week and you know, it has to be a 20 hour commitment. And then I think some of these other negative consequences can be averted. But that's a cultural change. And it takes some work to create that. But I don't know you guys' thoughts on that. Maybe it's too utopian.

[33:03](#)

L: Uh, Neeru, I'm a big believer in that. I, I think I've seen that, I think a lot of people kinda quickly push that idea down based on some of the, the past ideas of the way we've always done it. But I think those, those ideas and those concepts could work and do work at times. I've seen those in clubs, you know, if we're looking at developing the whole child in a healthy way, and that's our first goal. And then a secondary goal is for them to be an elite performer because if they're going to be an elite performer, it's going to help them to be well rounded and healthy. You know, I think if we look at it that way, that helps a lot. And I wonder, one thing, you know, Neeru, a lot of times coaches will argue, well, especially with, you know, players on that high performance track, well, I don't want them to get injured. Because you start going through, well, let's play some basketball. Well, I don't want him to hurt an ankle. Let's go play, you know, soccer. I don't want them to blow out their knee. And so they start, you know what I'm saying? They start going through the things of, what would you say to those coaches who would argue against that because of their concerns of a, of a kid getting hurt, playing a different sport or a different activity.

[34:00](#)

N: Yeah, absolutely. That's when all this stuff started and so we realized actually the injury risk was actually higher up staying in the same sport. So it was actually funny. So what you do is you, you're worried about that risk and we can't stop everything there. There's a risk of anything, right? But then you go back to your sport instead, you do your same sport all year around, and then now you're out for three months because you were doing the same sport year round. So the injuries were lower, but you can't avert, you can't avert injury. I'll still have job security, let me put it that way.

[34:27](#)

L: You will.

[34:28](#)

N: We're going to be okay. All right. There are kids and you can't avert them all. If there's exposure, you know, risks, but the risks are actually greater of staying in that same sport, you know, throughout the whole year. So no, but yeah, that same argument I hear as well too, and we don't have data to support that

[34:42](#)

L: And just thinking about this, Neeru. So again, if let's say, you know, Johnny and I want to start doing this with kids who are 15 and all they've done is tennis for the last six years, physically they may not be as developed or have the sports skills to be able to play these sports in a healthy way. So, so, but if you're doing this from a young age where you're developing the whole athlete and the whole person, then you can put them on a basketball court at 12 and not necessarily worry so much about them getting injured, but if they haven't played basketball or their body, their musculoskeletal body is developed only based on tennis, then maybe you should be a little bit worried when you go and try to do different things when they're older.

[35:23](#)

N: It's a great point. Yeah. Actually that's a thing I should think about as well too and explain that. You're right. You have not prepared yourself to even do the other sports. So, so yeah, be an organized person. I used to say this like, you know, I'm not telling a national ranked 14 year old boy or girl to start trying for the basketball team, like just out of nowhere. This is a decision to happen much earlier than that. And we still have to have a pathway of development for a 14 year old who, like you said, has only done tennis. And so at player development you guys have, you know, a great opportunity to help shape their athlete development with a lot of other ways. But it's not the same way for other, you know, for many academies throughout the country. It's not, you know, it's just tennis and so that's where you get those other experiences. Even if you're playing in a rec league or playing for fun on, you know, Sundays with your friends. I mean just something else that's self exploration that doesn't make you feel like it's 16 to 20 hours a week of something and zero hours a week of anything else but that.

[36:15](#)

L: And then think about it and we'll have to wrap up soon, Johnny's giving me look, but the confidence you get from playing these different sports, it matters because if you only feel like you can play tennis, they look at themselves differently as an athlete. And so yeah, I'm good at hitting a ball but maybe not moving on the court or doing these other things. And I think, you know,

especially for a young athlete, the confidence of being able to do different things, being able to kick and throw and run and catch and all these things I think is absolutely massive for them then going in a healthy way in continuing to sample or at least, you know, specialized sampling when they're a little bit older.

[36:55](#)

N: Yeah, I mean I drool when I see that. One of the kids in our, uh, on our high school basketball team, she is a national ranked junior, has a DI scholarship in tennis and she is, she's a starting point guard and she, she's phenomenal. I mean, just, it's awesome to watch her athleticism. And I think, boy, she's gonna be quite a tennis player and I'm so happy she chose tennis over basketball for college. So we need to get more of those stories where we're sharing athletes with other sports, but then, you know, they still have the drive to continue on with tennis and we can't be afraid that we're going to lose them or something like that. Like the love of it comes from them, not from us saying you need to just not be exposed to anything else. So maybe that's perhaps a good time for us to kind of [inaudible] because I think the general concepts are the same, right? We all, we want these kids to keep staying in this sport, but don't be afraid to let them explore a bit and then circle back and continue on with tennis.

[37:46](#)

J: Well, that answered my next question before I closed out, which was let's give some solid advice to the listeners before we, uh, drop the mic, but you just dropped the mic before I even could ask it. So...

[37:57](#)

L: That's how he rolls.

[37:58](#)

N: That's how you roll. Same wavelength, yeah.

[38:03](#)

L: But if you have other pieces of advice that you'd like to give.

[38:05](#)

J: Yeah.

[38:06](#)

N: Yeah. No, I mean the simplest one, the biggest one is that I think we have to go back to the simplest things is we want the kids to help direct their experiences by giving them an option and a menu of options. And I know some kids will say, I really love tennis, I wanna keep playing tennis and they want to do it over and over again. But if you don't give them options, that's the only thing, if we only tell our kids, you can only have cheese pizza and that's it, then they're only gonna choose cheese pizza. So you want to make sure they have a variety of options first of all. And then there's some point that you as a parent have to look at what's best for them. And even if they might say as a young age, like, I really just only want to do this, you know, my kid doesn't want to go to school and he would rather play video game all day long, but at some point you have to say, look, this is better for you to do this. And, and I think that's when the parent can help step in and try and let the child drive their positive experiences more and then give them a wider menu. And I think when you do that, you may be surprised at what they tell you and ask them regularly how much fun they're having with the experience.

[39:02](#)

J: That's awesome. That's absolutely incredible. Incredible advice. So Neeru, listen, we want to thank you so much for taking the time. We know you're extremely busy, but thanks for coming on the compete like a champion podcast here and discussing these really important elements of, uh, of youth sports and you know, kids in youth sports and hopefully this gives some really good guidelines, really good information to parents, coaches, players, you know, listening into this. So really appreciate your time here.

[39:29](#)

N: Absolutely. Thank you guys so much. Have a great new year and, uh, keep playing tennis.

[39:32](#)

L: Thank you, Neeru. Appreciate it man. Catch up soon.

[39:35](#)

N: Take care guys.

[39:36](#)

J: Alrighty. So thanks for listening in to compete like a champion. We're going to put some really, really great resources in the show notes. Um, Neeru was on Real Sports with Bryant Gumbal with youth sports risk. We'll also put links to his social media and some research studies. Until next time, Dr Larry Lauer, we're checking out.

[39:58](#)

L: Checking out.