

Transitioning Multi-Sport Athletes

School work, stress, bumps and bruises, strains and sprains are all part of a HS Athlete's life. How an athlete handles these various factors determines their ability to contribute to their team(s). A multi-sport athlete faces the added challenge of taking the various stressors from one sport season into the next, sometimes with little more than 24 hours to change into their new uniform and lace up a different pair of athletic shoes. Regardless of any policy that is enacted, what should we do for these athletes?

What I heard coaches say last night at our athletic meeting was that allowing extra time for athletes to make a transition from one sport to the next is not reasonable as it causes several problems: "our season starts in less than 2 weeks", "it's not fair to those who have been going through the tryout period to have to wait any longer for selections to be made. Others' comments from last night's meeting seem to hit closer to the spirit of Bob's concern: "leave it up to the athlete to decide what he/she needs (i.e. extra day, two, three to regroup)" and "we're already giving them a weekend off". The question of who is to say how much time is needed and who needs the time to transition from one sport season to the next is really at issue here. I appreciate Martin Logue's comments about handling each athlete on an individual basis. What's good for one athlete (e.g. giving a couple of extra days off) could be a let down to another athlete who is chomping at the bit to put the last season behind them and forge ahead. But the lack of participation in the discussion by so many coaches concerned me.

While the arguments the coaches presented were logical and were expressed out of concern for what they think is best for their team and athletes, the fact remains we have #? multi-sport athletes rolling from sport to sport with little time or energy spent on really preparing them for the challenge. How many injuries can we attribute to this pattern of poor transitioning? How many practices/games are missed by these athletes because of stress related illness or fatigue? How are these kids handling their work load and other commitments? (This last question is the larger question that Dan Lang and Martin Logue and others wanted to bring attention to: are our kids spread too thin here?) My concern is for the athletes' physical and mental preparedness on the field (with a nod to school-related stress as a contributing factor), so how can we better help our multi-sport athletes deal with the transition from one sport season to the next?

As adults and educators, we must take the lead in teaching the student-athlete how to handle the mental and physical stress of the multi-sport commitment. For the multi-sport athlete's mental health, days off between seasons should certainly be handled on a case by case basis, however a minimum of two days off should be adapted (1 day to reflect on the past season and 1 day to prepare for the upcoming season). As for the physical health of our multi-sport athletes, we need to budget time for rehabilitation of any preexisting injuries from the previous season and address the individual needs of the athlete as they adapt to the particular movement patterns and metabolic needs of their next sport. To this end, I propose the following:

During the first two weeks of the new season (just a suggestion, but pretty close to the ideal transition period), the coaches and performance team (Athletic Training Staff and Strength and Conditioning Staff) should implement a coordinated program that includes injury rehab, prehab and training movement patterns of the new sport. A prescription of specialized strength and conditioning should be followed for the first few weeks to enable the athlete to build up muscle groups that may be "asleep" (especially for radically different sports like cross country and basketball or soccer). This Active Transitioning Program would be implemented both during and outside of normal practice times. The athlete would be responsible for outside scheduling (a.m., lunch time, pre or post practice). The coaching staff and performance team would coordinate in-practice work. In practice work could include basic or modified versions of basic drills ("1/2 speed", "no contact", "simulated" and other such drills would apply). Extra time for warm up, stretch and in-practice recovery could also apply, depending on the metabolic and/or aerobic conditioning needs of the athlete. Release time from live drills or other full speed activity should also be coordinated with the performance team so the athlete could work on different areas of performance deficit, rehab or prehab during practice.

While it may be true that the athletes we are talking about are exceptional, by no means are we granting exceptions to them. If anything, the multi-sport athlete must work extra to better prepare him/herself for the various demands that are placed on their bodies over the course of their sport seasons. The support we lend them in their endeavors will pay for itself as we enable them to grow and improve throughout their careers here at the prep and beyond.

