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HEADLINE: A new column takes a swing at ups, downs of youth sports

BYLINE: CAL RIPKEN JR.

I can honestly say that writing an advice column was not something I envisioned doing. That being said, I am very excited about it and look forward to hearing from parents, coaches and young athletes each week.

Since retiring from baseball after the 2001 season, I have focused a lot of my energy on youth sports and growing the game of baseball at the grassroots level. This has energized me more than I would have imagined. I am very passionate about it.

Just like many of you, I am a dad. My daughter, Rachel, will be 16 next month, and my son, Ryan, is 12. I coach each of their basketball teams and pay very close attention to Ryan's baseball team. He also enjoys playing soccer. Rachel sticks to basketball when it comes to sports, and focuses most of her time on the arts.

As I said in The Sun last week, I don't claim to have all of the answers. I do believe that I have a unique set of experiences, and maybe I can provide a different perspective. My wife, Kelly, and I go through all of the ups and downs that any parent goes through when helping their children grow in sports. I hope this column leads to some healthy feedback and debate, so that, in the end, the games improve for the kids.

Now to your questions:

Our son has been playing baseball for years and loves the game. We've been told by various coaches that he shows promise. Now that he's in high school, is there a way to have him objectively evaluated so we can all get a realistic sense of whether or not he has a future in baseball -- either at a college level or beyond?

-- Marcy D. Baer, Towson

This is an exciting time for your son. Now that he is in high school and looking at his chances of gaining a scholarship or being drafted, it is a good time to see how he compares to other elite ballplayers across the country. There are many ways you can do this. All over the United States, there are showcases going on, at which some of the best high school players compete against each other -- not only in games but also through objective skills testing and other forms of evaluation. These showcases are attended by many college recruiters and big league scouts and might give you a better idea of your son's talent level.

Evaluations are not foolproof by any means, but competing and measuring yourself against the best talent will tell you more than taking one person's subjective point of view. There are organizations such as Perfect Game that run showcases regularly, and you can find even more in publications such as Baseball America. Most of the players attending these are juniors or seniors, so don't expose him to a showcase too early.

At what age or grade should my child specialize in a single sport?

-- Linda Caccavalla, Perry Hall

I am a firm believer in not specializing too early. My boy is 12 and I encourage him to play as many sports as possible. This is good for a few reasons. First, it exposes him to more sports, which will let him find the one that he likes the most. Second, playing more sports improves your overall athleticism. In high school, I played soccer and baseball and I found that playing soccer improved my balance and footwork as well as my cardiovascular conditioning which, in turn, helped me in baseball.

There is no specific age, to be quite honest. Generally, this takes care of itself. At some point, they will gravitate to one sport and find that this is where their passion and skills lie.

My youngest daughter loves fast pitch softball. I've been taking her for pitching lessons for three years now. She won't take my advice about off-season workouts, but she will listen to others -- like her pitching coach. How can I get her to listen to me about this subject?

-- Walt Bondarenko, Perry Hall

I am chuckling as I answer your question because I experience the exact same thing.

There is something about children listening to everyone but their mom or dad. My boy Ryan needed help with an aspect of his baseball skills. I told him how to improve upon that and he told me that this wasn't what his coach told him to do. I said, "Ryan, who do you think might have the edge when it comes to baseball knowledge, me or your coach?" It just didn't matter; he listened to his coach.

I would suggest that this is a hard battle to win, simply because you are her dad. Get with her coach and see if he or she can relay that message to her. It might also be beneficial to find a book or DVD by someone who is an accomplished softball player and see if it speaks to off-season conditioning. This might resonate well with your daughter.

Don't get frustrated. This happens to all of us!

Have a question or issue arising from your child's involvement in sports?
Send it by e-mail to askcal@baltimoresun.com.