

Local coaches on multi-sport debate



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(Photo: Getty Images)

High School athletes focusing on one sport in high school or using the time to play multiple sports has been an increasingly hot topic in prep sports circles in recent years and recent studies show that some of the best college football players were multi-sport athletes in high school.

A report by USA Today, citing data by Tracking Football, found that 26 of the 31 first-round selections in the NFL Draft last month played more than one sport in high school.

Since 2013, more than 81 percent of first-round selections were multi-sport athletes while in high school.

With the increased emphasis on “specializing” – or concentrating on one sport to maximize scholarship potential – has come the rise of more 7-on-7 football camps and summer baseball and softball travel teams as well as a huge recruiting emphasis on AAU basketball in the summer.

“High School athletics has become so competitive that now us as coaches, and I will point the finger right at myself, sometimes we get competitive for these kids time,” Sterlington football coach and athletic director Jason Thompson said. “So many camps and summer leagues and things have become huge recruiting tools, a lot more so than they were 10 years ago.”

A small selection of multi-sport athletes locally that have gone on to professional careers in recent years include Bubby Brister at Neville, Andrew Whitworth and Bradie James at West Monroe, Kyle Williams at Ruston, Reuben Randle at Bastrop, and Mark Laird in baseball at Ouachita Christian.

But as the trend in this year’s NFL Draft would suggest, local coaches say there is no substitute for the chance to learn from different competitive situations.

“Those guys are just used to competing on a daily basis,” Thompson said. “Each one helps you become better in another sport.”

West Ouachita coach Joey Pender said that each sport builds on a different fundamental aspect of being a top football player and he encourages players to do that.

“Track builds toughness and baseball and basketball are good for hand and eye coordination,” Pender said. “I don’t understand the drive to specialize kids. Playing multiple sports gives them a competitiveness and they become well rounded.”

One sport that seems to be picking up steam among high school football coaches in northeast Louisiana more each year is track and field.

“There were guys that ran track this year for the first time as sophomores and I could tell a difference today for our first summer workout in their speed,” OCS coach Steven Fitzhugh said. “If you’re running, you will get faster.”

At St. Frederick, Jeff Tannehill said that the track team has been an outlet for football athletes to find another area they excel in and makes them more accountable.

“It is something they can excel at and they find a niche that they didn’t know they had,” Tannehill said. “I have never been a fan of just playing one sport in high school,” Tannehill said. “I would not want anyone to miss out on these memories they could have and it makes them more well-rounded people.”

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