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Playing sports year-round has its pros and cons for high school athletes

A council on pediatrics recommends at least 2 months off a year for athletes focusing on one sport.

By Buddy Collings and Gary Curreri, Sun Sentinel

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Linwood Ross Jr. said he doesn't mind playing basketball 11 out of 12 months a year.

The Westminster Academy senior plays for his school team and also the Gold Coast boys 17-Under travel team. And loves it.

"This makes it easier for me for a college to get a look rather than try and force the colleges to come to me during the school year," Ross Jr. said during a recent AAU tournament in Coral Springs. "I look at this that it is all going to pay off and I am doing this for my future and doing something that I love."

Ross, 17, says to balance school and basketball takes good time-management skills.

"It is definitely tough when you have tests almost every day and then you have to go and play basketball," Ross said. "You need to put your priorities first. Ultimately, you are trying to get a scholarship and possibly furthering your career beyond either in the NBA or going overseas."

Some teenagers, such as Ross, can handle the commitment of playing year-round. But experts warn that agendas that make the 82-game NBA schedule look like child's play can be harmful.

"The recommendation we've put out there is no more than five days a week of training and at least one to two months off during the year, minimum, for a particular sport," said Dr. Joel Brenner, chairman of the American Academy of Pediatrics Council on Sports Medicine and Fitness.

"Pro athletes have an offseason, and they're making millions of dollars. Kids are paying to play sports. You need time for body and brain to recover."

Brenner said multisport athletes can have lesser risk of overuse injuries and burnout.

"Not stressing the same joints all the time, that's much better," he said. "It's more concerning when you've got a basketball player 11½ months a year."
That's a difficult message to buy into for those seeing the dividends of an era where college rules changes have made summer the hot recruiting period.

With the increasing number of summer tournaments, colleges have the opportunity of seeing several recruits in a short period.

"The club program is really our only chance to see them and recruit them," Florida volleyball coach Mary Wise said. "We were just in Orlando for AAU nationals, and the level of play in every division was significantly higher than it was just a few years ago."

Leigh Andrew, who will be a senior volleyball player at Cardinal Gibbons, doesn't see a problem with non-stop competition.

"If there is a passion for the sport, there is nothing wrong playing all year," said Andrew, who has committed to North Carolina and played in an AAU tournament in Orlando last month. "It can help you get into college."

Coaches and parents say the tab, including hourly trainer's fees, club team dues and travel costs for players and family members, can climb to $8,000 annually.

Lake Mary girls soccer coach Bill Eissele, who has worked both the high school and club scene for 28 years, said a state-cup-level soccer player's family could pay $20,000 over five years. He notes that investment can lead to a college scholarship worth three times as much, but suggests parents should not picture a down payment on a scholarship that may not pan out.

Eissele thinks year-round specialization in one sport, which he sees as a problem, is much more prevalent in the Sun Belt because of the climate.

"When we won our first [state] championship in 1989, I had softball players and other girls that were good athletes I recruited to play soccer," Eissele said. "When we won it again in '98, there wasn't a player on my team that did not belong to a quality club soccer program. In that 10-year period, everything changed."

Brian Dooley, the coach of Team Boca's under-18 girls squad, knows exactly what it takes to make it at the collegiate level, as he is also the coach of the Florida Atlantic University women's soccer team with 128 victories in 13 seasons.

"If you're a player that's going to be playing at the Division I collegiate level, the ability to play year-round is critical," Dooley said. "Most of these kids are going to be playing more games in their club season than they are going to be playing in college ... They're preparing for what they want to do. And they're going to be successful because of their preparation."

*Staff writer Dieter Kurtenbach contributed to this report.*