

NEXT LEVEL

Athletes wanting to elevate their games in the off-season are looking towards club athletics.

BY CAROLINE CHANDLER

Whether it's a frosty winter morning spent weightlifting in the gym before school or practicing drills in the scorching heat of summer, the typical life of a club athlete is demanding. Athletes that choose to participate in both school and club athletics often have a hectic schedule balancing sports, school and social lives. With school athletics requiring hard work and commitment from athletes, club sports are a great way to elevate their game to the next level.

Nikki Koenig, who coaches the Lady Martin Brothers Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) 2021 team, knows the commitment her players have to basketball.

The players are expected to have a ball handling or shooting workout on a daily basis. One of the many benefits to club sports is the added skills that players learn.

"AAU can teach new skills and refine what the athlete already has. Basketball IQ is enhanced as the athlete will have more game experience during AAU," Koenig said.

While some club coaches discourage their athletes from training in multiple sports, Koenig does not.

"Playing other sports in high school is vital to mental and physical development for an athlete," Koenig said.

Club season at the high school level is typically whenever the high school schedule is not in session. The long season allows athletes to take visits to schools and attend basketball camps. Oftentimes, club basketball keeps players from participating in other school sports, as they feel

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- NIKKI KOENIG,
BASKETBALL COACH

that they have to play AAU the entire off-season.

Playing outside of the high school season can look different for every athlete. Michele Conlon, the assistant director of tennis at the Hawkeye Tennis and Recreation Complex, sees the improvements her players make to their games through tournament play, private lessons and group classes in the off-season.

"I think tournament play is key to success for experience, because tournaments present a lot of different challenges that you're going to have in the high school season. It can be strategic or understanding yourself and what you need to work on. The mental and emotional aspect needs to be practiced as much as the strokes," Conlon said.

With tennis being heavily technique and coordination based, practicing in the off-season is of much importance.

"I think that you can reinforce those techniques by playing in the off-season, but you can also add elements to your game. Maybe you want to work on some slice or defensive balls, or specific serve placement," Conlon said.

Training in the off-season allows for players to refine their skills and strategies to enhance all aspects of their game from volleys to serves.

David Rosenthal coaches club soccer at the Iowa Soccer Club as well as the varsity girls soccer team at West. Rosenthal says that extra insights are one of the added benefits that comes with club soccer.

"They're playing the other nine months of the year so they're gaining soccer knowledge. They might have different coaches and they get different knowledge from different coaches," Rosenthal said.

Many players take advantage of other practice opportunities by practicing for an age group lower or higher. Iowa Soccer Club offers a program called Super Skills, which any age group can attend, and has an emphasis on individual skills.

Julia Bernat '21 participates in both school and club soccer. For Bernat, technique is one benefit from club soccer that has elevated her level as a goalie.

"I have trained with many coaches over the years that have taught me valuable techniques and strategies that have helped me become the goalkeeper I am today," Bernat said.

With the high school season and club soccer taking up much of her time, Bernat feels as if there isn't a set time for the off-season.

"Winter is the off-season for high school, in which I've been participating in an indoor league and doing private goalkeeper training around five days a week to better prepare myself for spring soccer," Bernat said.

Participating in high school and club volleyball has helped Emma Dunlap '22 to further develop her volleyball skills.

"Skills that I've gained from club volleyball would include more advanced volleyball fundamental skills than what I work on during the school season," Dunlap said.

While the constant hours of drills and tournaments have heightened Dunlap's level, wrestling is an unlikely component that has also helped her to improve.

"I have found that although they are quite opposite sports, wrestling has helped condition me for volleyball and also has greatly built my mental toughness," Dunlap said.

Club sports and school sports require a hefty time commitment, leading to many athletes specializing in a sport at a young age rather than exploring all the sports available. Brendon Panther, the strength and conditioning coach at West, recognizes that while athletes who specialize with club athletics might rise to the top quickly while honing in one sport, they might be missing out on something more.

There can be lots of pressure to excel at the one chosen sport, and the athlete can miss out on playing other sports. Specialization can often lead to higher burnout rates.

"To expect kids to be interested in the same sport year round is unrealistic. It is likely that the athlete will no longer be interested and need a break," Panther said.

If the athlete truly loves the sport that they're participating in, the pros of club athletics and specialization outweigh the cons.

"My advice would be as a freshman, play as many sports and participate in as many activities as possible," Panther said. "Cast a wide net. You can focus on one sport while still playing other sports. By the time you are a junior you can start to whittle it down."

PHOTOS BY OWEN AANESTAD, ALYSSA SKALA & KARA WAGENKNECHT

ADRENALINE 15-17 NATIONAL TEAM

\$2000 national championship fee

\$250 national championship fee

TIME
2-3 weekly practices
2.5 hours per practice
+ out of state TOURNAMENTS

Dec. ————— June

Source: Adrenaline Volleyball Union

HTA

SEPT.-MAY
Monday-Thursday
2 hour classes

Source: Hawkeye Tennis Academy

TOURNAMENTS

range anywhere from **\$20-130**

average number of hours spent training per week

Days/Week	Members	Non-Members
2	250	290
3	345	405
4	420	500

cost

days/week for five weeks

AAAD

\$400-2,000 membership fee

TOTAL EXPENSE 2-4 workouts per week

varies based on team, tournaments, travel, equipment, etc.

SOME TEAMS ARE SPONSORED BY

ISC

MAJOR SHOE COMPANIES

Source: Amateur Athletic Union & Joe Goodman '20

June

March

185+690+366 = \$1,241 annual fees per player

registration staff facilities

2 hour practices

OUTDOOR 3 practices per week competition every weekend

2 practices per week occasional league game

INDOOR

SPORTS APRIL 24, 2020 **29**

Source: Iowa Soccer Club