

# Evaluating Summer Sport-Specific Camps

With the summer break right around the corner, many young athletes are seeing their mailbox fill up with sport-specific camp brochures. All promise top-notch college and/or professional coaching, some are boarding camps that will also involve travel expenses, and others are commuter camps not-too-far from home. How do you go about evaluating the best camp for you? The first step is identifying what you are hoping to accomplish by attending a sport camp. The next step is to categorize the different types of camps that are offered and understand the motivation of the organization offering the camp. Hopefully, armed with some objective evaluation criteria, you will choose the best camp for your young athlete and be pleased with the experience.

## **Identifying your “Why”**

This may seem like an absurd suggestion, everyone goes to a sport camp to get better at their sport, right? Actually, when I talk to families about this topic, I often hear several other reasons why parents are willing to spend several hundred dollars for their young athlete to attend a specific sport camp. Some families are hoping that their athlete will get noticed by the coaching staff and kick-off the recruiting process. Others are looking for specific skill training, while others want to get additional experience and playing time. In order to make sure you choose the best camp, parents and athletes should have a very open, specific conversation about what exactly they want to get out of the camp experience.

## **Types of Camps**

There are a number of different types of sport camps that are offered, each with its own focus and purpose.

General Individual Skills Camps: A skills camp will offer a broad overview of all the skills needed in a specific sport. They will often be broken down by age-group and during the camp groups will be refined based on skill-level. This is the most common type of camp and can be offered by a college program or a third-party sport-specific organization. Usually these camps will welcome a wide-range of ages and skill-levels, will be held over three to five days, and often include a boarding option with athletes staying in the college dorms and eating in the cafeteria.

Position Camps: These camps offer specific training targeted for a specific position. These camps are usually targeted toward older and more advanced players and often are shorter in duration than a general skills camp.

Team Camps: Typically a team camp is a multi-day tournament event without any specific skills training. High school coaches use these camps to evaluate their players and to experiment with player combinations outside of their normal school league schedule. Often these types of team camps are also being used for the training and evaluation of referees/officials.

Recruiting/Elite Camps: A recruiting or elite camp is an invitation-only camp offered by a college program and is usually reserved for high-school students going into their junior or senior year. The camp invitation may be sent directly to the player or can be forwarded through the high-school coach. Keep in mind that being invited to one of these camps will require that you have caught the eye of college coaches early in your high school career.

Showcase Camps: A showcase camp typically will involve some skill training sessions, but will most likely involve competitive game situations. Showcase camps can be set-up for an entire team or for individuals. If attending an individual showcase camp, the camp may be run more like a combine where you are measured and observed in individual drills. Most likely it will also include dividing up the participants into teams and playing in a tournament-style competition. The

camp organizer will invite a number of college coaches to observe the play and will provide a directory of players and their contact information. It is important to research the college coaches that will be in attendance at the event. You should also contact the college coaches from programs that interest you and plan to attend in advance of the camp. Be sure to let them know your interest in their school, your academic credentials, and your playing schedule.

National Select Camps/Teams: Several sports have a national governing body that will conduct structured programs to identify and train the top athletes across the country. In soccer this falls under the ODP program, in volleyball it is called High Performance. Often the identification of top-level athletes will start as young as age 12. This young age is obviously before athletes fully develop, so it is not necessarily an indication of which athletes will indeed turn into top-level recruits. If given the opportunity to participate in one of these national select camps or teams, it should be given careful consideration and would most likely take precedence over high-school or club team league or tournament competition. This type of exposure will provide access to national rankings and greater exposure. Most coaches should encourage this participation.

### **Finding a Camp**

Once you have a better idea of the type of camp that will meet your needs, you are ready to research and choose the camp(s) you will attend. There are several search tools available for you. I always recommend talking to your high school and/or club coach as well as other athletes that you play with. A personal recommendation to a camp is always an excellent step in the right direction, as long as the type of camp meets your specific needs and wants.

Most college athletic websites will have an area dedicated to the summer camps offered and this is an excellent source of information, especially if you already have a few colleges/universities in mind that may be of interest to the student-athlete down the road.

The internet also offers a number of websites dedicated to sport-specific camps offered by private companies and/or schools. A few useful sites that I have found are listed on my website "links" page. Check it out for additional ideas.

### **Preparing for Camp**

Along with all of the logistical preparations necessary to get to the camp of your choosing, make sure that you prepare yourself physically as well. Good money will be wasted on the camp if you do not make sure that you are in the proper condition to get the most out of the instruction and coaching being provided. If you will be in-season right up until the time to head to camp, you should be in good shape. But, if it has been a few weeks or months since you were in your peak, in-season, shape, make sure you are disciplined enough to get into good condition. Find friends to play your sport to get your primary muscle groups ready for an intense camp and make sure to do adequate cardio-training prior to heading out for camp. Also be sure to pay attention to good nutrition and adequate hydration during the weeks leading up to the camp as well as during your sport-camp stay.

Be sure to be open-minded about the training and mechanics being taught, having exposure to different training techniques is the reason you are attending a camp in the first place. Have fun immersing yourself in your sport and meeting new friends with a similar passion. Camp should be a highlight to your summer, get out and play!

# Off-Season Training and Summer Skills Camps

With so many choices available where does an athlete, coach or parent begin? From team camps to one-on-one personal training there is something for everyone. The big question is: Which is the right program for you?

My advice to athletes and parents is to answer these 3 questions first:

## **1. What are your goals?**

- Think both short-term and long-term
  - Is it to get faster, stronger, bigger?
- Is it to score more goals or dunk a basketball?
- Is it to make the varsity team or play in college?
- Is it simply to become a better overall athlete?

## **2. What is your level of commitment?**

- Basically, how much time are you able and willing to commit?
- Often times athletes and parents leave a camp or program wanting more than what they received

## **3. How much are you willing to commit financially?**

- Spend your money wisely!
  - What is your return on investment?
- \$600 for a 1 week camp with 300+ athletes vs. \$600 for 3 months of Performance Training - you make the call!

Once you sit down and answer the above questions honestly, your decision on training becomes much clearer. By taking this personal inventory the choice becomes about your needs and wants instead of some flashy marketing brochure that has big promises and a bigger price tag.

So often we see athletes that are so focused on skill development and playing game after game that they completely forget and neglect performance training. Can you imagine if the Colorado Rockies played all year long without taking a break? Sure, skill development, practice and games are important, but without speed, strength, agility, power and overall fitness you will never maximize your potential as an athlete. Let's face it; there are only so many Michael Jordans, Wayne Gretzkys and Tiger Woods in the world. Most youth athletes fall within a bell curve of skill set regardless of their sport. What this means is that everyone is about the same. Sure some athletes are exceptional and are at the top end of the curve and others are still not so good and are at the bottom of the curve. What does this mean to you? Being that your skills are about the same as everybody else you are competing against what are you going to do to take your game to the next level? The answer is simple -

improve your performance! By increasing aspects of your game like speed, strength, footwork, power, flexibility, balance, agility you can singlehandedly become a better athlete and rise to the top of the that bell curve.

When it comes to performance training, there are differences among providers and programs offered. Some things you want to look for when choosing a program is the qualifications of the coaches. The most qualified coaches and trainers available possess a CSCS (Certified Strength & Conditioning Specialist) certification. This certification requires that candidates must have a minimum Bachelor's degree and pass an extensive certification exam. In addition to education and training, you want to make sure that your coach or trainer has experience and proven results with athletes that are similar to you. Education and training is mandatory, but experience in the field and great customer service is what could make your training remarkable.

The second thing to look for is a world-class training facility and environment. Look for state-of-the-art equipment in a spacious, friendly environment. Another great aspect of a training center is one that has an in-house sports medicine and physical therapy clinic. This allows the athletes who have current injuries or sustain an injury to be seen and treated quickly by professionals. The ideal facility would like very similar to a professional sports, college or Olympic Training center featuring a multi-disciplinary staff with many services. Be wary of camps that do not have a proper training environment and utilize parking lots or vacant lots or fields to train in.

Lastly, you need to find out what type of training programs are offered so you can decide which program would be the best for you. Looking for a "Sport Specific" training program is the key for most athletes. The reason is that some sports are quite different in terms of performance requirements. For example, a hockey player should not train the same way as a volleyball player. Yes, they are both very demanding sports, but the training focus needs to be different.

Some athlete's need or want one-on-one attention is geared solely to the needs of their sport and schedule. Others do better in a small group setting where they can train with their friends or teammates. This allows them to still focus on the demands of their sports and lends itself to camaraderie and competitiveness. Still other athletes enjoy group sessions that focus on athletic performance development as a whole. Many athletes play multiple sports and the carry over of speed, strength, agility, etc. so these classes are perfect for their needs.

Finally the last type of training combines both performance training mixed with skill training. This is truly the best of both worlds. Typically offered in a camp setting, athletes will spend half the program working on skill development in their sport with expert coaches and the other half is spent working on sport-specific performance. This is a very popular option for athletes because it

offers the best of both worlds in a “1 Stop Shop.” In summary, there are several training programs offered that might be right for you - you need to determine what is offered and what would be best for your needs.

Article contributed by: Michael Keating, MS, ATC, CSCS,  
Manager of Sports Performance  
**Impact Sports Performance**  
11575 Main Street #100  
Broomfield, CO 80020  
(303) IMPACTU (467-2288)  
[www.myimpactsports.com](http://www.myimpactsports.com)  
Email Michael [michael@myimpactsports.com](mailto:michael@myimpactsports.com)

Michael, a Certified Athletic Trainer and Certified Strength and Conditioning Specialist, brings over 13 years of experience in the field of sports medicine and rehabilitation to Impact Sports. As part of the Impact Team, Michael will provide sports performance training, rehabilitation as well as marketing. A native of Chicago, Michael has been fortunate to work with all levels of athletes from the weekend warrior to professional athletes. Most recently he served as a Clinical Athletic Trainer at a Boulder sports medicine clinic. Prior to this he was an Athletic Trainer with the Chicago Blackhawks of the NHL for 6 years, additionally he has worked with teams from the NBA, MLB, MLS and NFL. He continues to work with the US Rugby and US Soccer national teams. He currently serves as the Medical Director for USA Rugby.

Michael has been active with legislation in the athletic training profession. He also teaches courses in anatomy and rehabilitation throughout the country. Michael received a B.S. degree in Athletic Training from Southern Illinois University and a M.S. degree in Sports Medicine and Exercise Physiology from the University of Illinois.

Michael and his wife Amy and their triplets; Molly, Katie and Charlie reside in Denver.