

Neil developed a passion for sport that will last a lifetime... while being nurtured early on as a multisport athlete

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Simultaneous multisport success is possible... with the right help



“Doing 3 sports at once taught me how to face failure and still go on. I **always** want to do more than one sport!”

—Neil Zhou, multi-sport athlete

Specialization Results in Excellence... or does it?

We’ve all seen it, right? Kids going ‘whole hog’ into a sport, based on the theory that specialization breeds excellence.

Malcom Gladwell created the meme that 10,000 hours or more, need to be invested in any one thing, in order to get really good at it. Researchers have since questioned the theory, but still the statement seems to hang on.

So even if you lean into that theory, how do you decide on the sport? What if a kid likes more than one?

How can parents possibly coordinate more than one sport at a time, with those kinds of hours ‘needed’ to be committed to each sport?

We often see it... mega-time investment in any one sport, breeding burnout. A common problem today is kids getting hurt, bored, disappointed, or just plain losing interest in sport and activity in general, by their early to mid-teens.

But Neil, his parents, and his coaches, found a way for Neil to excel in three different sports. At the same time. While supporting his passion for sport in general and love of activity overall.

You’ll find out about the ‘secret’ ingredient to his success. And how he and his parents were able to overcome the challenges typically facing a young athlete doing multiple sports at once.

At an Early Age, Experimentation was Encouraged

From an early age, Neil’s parents encouraged him to experiment with different sports. They felt it was important to try lots of different sports early on.

Living in Richmond BC, Neil played community sports from grade 2. He was involved in soccer, basketball, taekwondo, and swimming. It was early stages for each sport, but it kept him active. Early on, each individual sport commitment was not large. Of course, layer on several different schedules, and the overall workload quickly became daunting.

Moving to South Surrey didn’t Slow Him Down

The family moved to South Surrey, and Neil moved to Sunnyside Elementary, where he finished his primary years. During his time there, he did drop Soccer... to his father’s chagrin (Dad’s sport was soccer).

Neil says: “I was **least** good at soccer.”

He also swapped out basketball and taekwondo for water polo and hockey.

So Neil was still a multi-sport athlete as he finished up Grade 7, with competitive swimming at PSW, water polo with the Fraser Valley Water Polo club, and Hockey with Semiahmoo Minor Hockey Association.

He loved it all. And he became good at all of them. Very good.

But what kind of challenges did Neil and his family have to overcome to keep up this crazy pace? And how did they make it all work? After all, it wasn't just Neil and his family in the mix... he had coaches, teachers and teammates involved as well.

The Challenge of Wanting it All, and Overcoming the Obstacles

Neil and his parents showed great determination to get what they felt was right for Neil. And what they felt was right, was keeping Neil involved in multiple sports for as long as he wanted to. Participating at a high level.

In Neil's own words: “I wanted to be best in ALL sports... and to be consistent in my effort.” That's very important to Neil. And very mature.

From his Mom Rebecca Li's perspective, sport involvement contributes in other ways. She says: “Sports help create quality adults.” So it was important to the entire family to find a way to support the sport focus.

The obstacles included the logistics of getting Neil fed properly and to practise, keeping his school grades up, juggling multiple training and competition schedules that often conflicted, ensuring he had social and family time, and managing the wear and tear on his young body and mind. Growing kids need sleep, and rest. How do you do that and keep up the schedule?

Figuring out How to Make it All Work

They started to figure out how to make multi-sport activity a reality for Neil. Family members helped with Neil's little brother, and preparing convenient



and nutritious meals. Rebecca, a buyer for a grocery chain, has an employer that's favourable to chaotic family schedules. Rebecca even switched from a gas to an electric vehicle to keep transport costs down. Neil's dad travels extensively for work, so it was difficult for him to contribute on a daily basis.

Determination, and a positive outlook kept the momentum going. Neil's work ethic and budding efficiency skills helped him manage his school work. One thing his parents insisted on, was that sport wouldn't interfere with his education.

Neil grasped that concept early on, and his teachers to this day remain pleasantly surprised at his ability to focus on his school work. And get his assignments done properly and on time.

In fact, his teachers helped support the overall effort. Neil singles out two teachers that have had an incredibly positive influence. His grade 7 teacher Ms. Aven, and his Grade 2 teacher Mr. Lee.

Both have been ardent supporters of his busy multisport life, and they've left a very positive impact on Neil. As Neil says, “Ms. Aven always showed interest in my sports, and even came to cheer me on!”

However, there's one other especially important part of the solution to their challenge of being a successful multisport athlete. This, they feel, is the 'secret ingredient.' It's the cooperation and understanding developed between all of his coaches.

“...the ‘secret ingredient’ is the cooperation and understanding developed between all of his coaches.”

Rebecca worked hard to make sure all coaches were aware of the other demands on Neil’s schedule. Being upfront and transparent helped everyone plan.

All three sets of coaches were constantly mindful of the other sports’ demands, compromising when necessary. When Neil had to miss a hockey tournament because of a swimming competition, the hockey coaches didn’t give Neil or Rebecca grief. When Neil needed to miss an early morning swim practise because he needed extra sleep or rest, that wasn’t a problem.

“...we don’t want him to lose his love of the sport.”

—Ben Geary, PSW Swim Coach

And sharing training sessions between water polo and competitive swimming was done amicably. In fact, Neil’s swim coach, Ben Geary states, “At that age, I feel it’s beneficial to be multisport... we don’t want him to lose his love of the sport. We’re good with him doing the core (primary) workouts, and skipping the rest.”

Maybe it was Gretzky documenting his belief that multiple sports early on helped him become



a great hockey player. Maybe that’s helped coaches embrace the philosophy of the benefits of multisport activity.

The Results of All the Effort

Neil has excelled in all three sports. In water polo he performs at a national level. In hockey his team won provincials and took part in elite invite-only tournaments in Alberta and Quebec. In competitive swimming, he was part of a relay team that set

national records in the 4x50, 4x100 and 4x200 freestyle event. As well, he’s ranked 1st in Canada in the 50m and 100m freestyle.

But Neil and his parents, and his coaches, all noticed other benefits resulting from this multisport pursuit. Benefits that are, in their own way, more important than the trophies and awards he’s racked up.

First of all, his coaches noticed the cross-training was physically complimentary. As water polo coach

Georgiy states: "Compromise was easier because he wasn't out of shape"

In addition, Neil's multisport focus taught him great life skills; resilience, giving, thankfulness, and a positive 'can-do' attitude.

As Neil's swim coach Ben says: "He elevates the whole group's energy level. He's always positive... a great influence on the other kids."

Next Steps

Going into grade 8, Neil has decided to trim down to 2 sports (water polo and competitive swimming), and believes it's sustainable over the long term. Still a multisport athlete, he's going to be upping the commitment to both. Both Ben and Georgiy feel he has great potential. However, both feel he has work to do.

Georgiy feels it's important to do the proper work on his key muscle groups, to not get hurt. In fact, because he typically arrived from a hockey practise that focused on legs, he encouraged and supported Neil doing flexibility and mobility work for 30 min on deck before practise. This needs to continue.

Ben feels the next step for Neil is to work on the technical side of swimming. But no one is too concerned. As Water Polo Coach Georgiy says: "He's focused. Neil isn't the guy to start the goof-off train... he's on the 'working harder' side of the spectrum, so I can cut him some slack."

So it's possible for anyone to be a multisport athlete... and use that experience to not only avoid

burnout, but set the stage for a life filled with activity. With family and athlete determination, the right attitude, support of teachers, and most importantly cooperation and flexibility among all of the coaches, it's definitely possible to excel at multiple sports, and have incredible fun while doing it.

It takes persistence, but Neil is showing how to do it while having fun. In his own words: "Just try your best in all sports. Be consistent in effort. And when you're not making your times, set new goals to overcome."

What's Next for Neil?

Neil's goals are exciting. He dreams big. He wants to make the National water polo team, swim in the Olympics, become a coach, and also a lifeguard. He does have shorter-term goals, like breaking 25 sec in the 50 free, and getting taller. Perhaps only the last one is out of his personal control.

Educationally, he wants to go to University or College in Canada or the USA. Top of the list is a Div. 1 school with a great sports program. He sees multi-sport activity as a path to achieve this, and certainly has the necessary grades.

Neil is clearly a young man that will keep his passion for sport throughout life.

As Neil says: "I **always** want to do more than one sport!"

With that kind of attitude and passion, he'll achieve great things.

Key take-aways to building a multi-sport athlete's passion and drive:

- It takes a support team working together: parents, teachers, coaches.
- Coach collaboration, flexibility and understanding is critical.
- The athlete's attitude, positivity and work ethic are important.



Sport for Life is an organization dedicated to instilling the love of sport and activity in everyone, at an early age, which lasts throughout life.