



“Redshirting” At Eighth Grade: Hyper-Parenting or Sports Smart?

Steve Ballance: Arguing FOR vs. Will Frazier: Arguing AGAINST

by **WILL FRAZIER AND STEVE BALLANCE,**
DIG IN BASEBALL

STEVE BALLANCE: *It's Player Smart*

When running a baseball development and training organization spanning three states, you can't help but recognize issues that crop up, cause controversy and challenge the status quo, particularly in high school sports.

One challenge lately is the trend to hold back or “redshirt” eighth graders, having them repeat their last middle school year, whether academically necessary or not, in order to become stronger, larger, faster and smarter for high school sports—in this case, baseball. In Montgomery County, Maryland, it appears to be almost the norm, particularly at sports-centered private schools. (This isn't scientific; I report anecdotal evidence.)

Hey, let's face it, there's a growing bias in favor of big-bodied players in the big leagues—why not grab a head start? Earlier this year, in “Here Come The Flamethrowers,” a March 29, 2013, article in *The Wall Street Journal*, writer Matthew Futterman noted that the game's pitchers on average have gained about a half-inch in height since 2000. He cited Adrian Bejan, a Duke University engineering professor who chronicles sports evolution and who wrote a recent study of body size in baseball.

The fact is, as Bejan observes in his work, bigger *is* stronger and faster. It's proven. Why wouldn't you want your son to be as big and as strong as he can be to get to the next level, in this case, to college?



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Dig In Baseball Coach Brett Daly (right) meets on the mound with catcher Riley Bartlett and pitcher Dylan Hyman.

HERE ARE THE ADVANTAGES:

MATURITY. The extra year allows your player time to mature as a person. This helps in the classroom and on the field, eliminating immature goofing off. I admit, I could have benefitted from such a policy, even though I had great success on the diamond. If I graduated at 18 instead of 17, I think my results would have been different, much better. Other kids who were held back in elementary school seemed to flourish socially, academically and athletically. It worked out for them. They went on to play in college.

AN ACADEMIC BOOST. I believe that taking an extra year to enter the academically rigorous territory of high school, with its equally rigorous sports schedule, helps a kid graduate and get into a good college. They're not entering their freshman year in college when they should still be a senior in high school. Being a senior, instead of a college freshman, helps in the classroom and on the field. Baseball IQ will develop further over an additional 20-100 games ... and many more practices.

AN EXTRA YEAR ON THE FIELD. That extra year of playing experience at 14U is not insignificant. What does it mean to play as many as 100 more games, if you play the whole year? Might your player dominate at this level? Perhaps, if he's fully developed. All the better if he's a late-bloomer from a physical standpoint. But if that's the consideration, you're not looking at the big picture—allowing him to increase confidence in school or readying for high school, academically and athletically. He could spend another year to build strength, both natural strength and through lifting weights. Speed will develop. Seeing a 14-year-old run against a 12-year-old is often like seeing a racehorse beat a poodle. This growth strengthens bones, tendons and muscles, and prevents future injuries.

Does this mean you and your son are taking an advantage at all costs, as if he started quaffing PEDs or doping? No. There should be a clear reason to hold a kid back in eighth grade, not just a willy-nilly one. Baseball is important, but there should be an academic or social reason, as well. Perhaps it is low grades, something that's not right maturity-wise, or anxiety, nervousness or not paying attention.

I do know most public school districts require that you be younger than 19 to play sports by a certain cutoff date, so you'd want to be careful of that. "Redshirting" clearly is easier to do in elementary school than middle school; it's easier on the child and the parents.

It probably is better to come out of high school as a raw recruit than a polished 19-year-old. Colleges like youth as an upside—that's more time that they can work with you and make you better. But the major leagues teams won't care—talent and size prevail. Division I schools will look to big-bodied players and Division III schools will look less to size and more to raw talent. But the fact is this: Redshirt in eighth grade and you're likely to be bigger, giving you a better chance to win a Division I scholarship—that's a driver for many parents. But academics should be your focus, with baseball as a benefit.

If someone told me they're thinking of holding their son back, I'd say, "Cool. Why?" If the only reason is baseball and the boy's a straight-A overachiever, am I supposed to say they're making a good decision? Probably not. Know your child; you never really know what lies ahead, so don't try to guess the future.



Photo: Susan Ardoin

Scott Ardoin, on Dig In Baseball's 17U high school team, gets ready to apply the tag on the runner in Pastime Baseball's 18U National Championships in Pittsburgh, Pa. Second baseman Johnny "JJ" Jan Jr. looks on. Both players, from Northwest High School in Germantown, Md., will play Division III college baseball next season.

HYPER-PARENTING?

MAYBE ... INTEGRITY FIRST, THE REST FOLLOWS

WILL FRAZIER: *An 'Unfair Advantage'*

There are more than 4.5 million results on Google under “holding kids back to excel in sports”—obviously it’s a subject that is talked about.

Even Randy Cohen, the former ethicist at *The New York Times*, weighed in. Holding kids back to excel at sports happens all the time, Cohen says. He thinks it is deplorable. In a 2006 column published at ESPN.go.com, he writes that schools should forbid it.

“It fails ethically both by falsely implying that a child is being held back on academic grounds and by granting some—and only some—kids an extra year of athletic eligibility,” he writes. “A child’s education should not be distorted by the faint chance of winning a sports scholarship a decade hence.”

In “Thrive in 2025: Holding Kids Back for Success,” Jacqueline Burt in *Parents Magazine* writes that more parents are waiting an extra year to enroll their child in kindergarten. Is a late start a smarter start?

The idea of “redshirting” preschoolers boomed after a 2006 University of California at Santa Barbara study, Burt writes. Researchers Kathy Bedard and Elizabeth Dhuey found that grade-schoolers among the oldest in their class have a distinct learning edge over the youngest kids in their grade, scoring 4 to 12 percent higher on standardized math and science tests. The achievement gap narrows over time, Burt wrote, but doesn’t go away, since skills acquired early on complement later education. The same study showed the oldest middle school students outperformed younger classmates by 2 to 9 percent, and that high

school students who were among the oldest in their class were nearly 12 percent more likely to enroll in a four-year college or university.

Another factor influencing redshirting, Burt notes, was Malcolm Gladwell’s 2008 bestseller, “Outliers: The Story of Success.” In the book, the author uses statistical analysis to prove a disproportionate number of professional hockey players are born during January, February and March, lending support to the theory that the oldest kids in class have a developmental advantage that boosts odds they will excel in school, in sports, and in life.

These influences turned the idea of holding kids back into a national trend, especially among boys and those born late in the year, Burt says.

So maybe the message is this: If you redshirt, redshirt early! Later, it becomes an issue of integrity. I do see an eighth-grade holdback as an unfair advantage.

But plenty of people benefit. My brother is the perfect example of someone who could have. Born October 20, he was immature. He needed another year to get used to school.

It’s interesting that in NCAA football, only 20 percent of players *don’t* redshirt when they get to college. In a 2007 interview, NCAA president Myles Brand said 80 percent of Division I college football players redshirt, allowing them time to learn the college playbook and more time to develop physically, according to eHow.com.



Photo: Johnny R. Jan



Photo: Johnny R. Jan

Johnny “JJ” Jan Jr. leads his Dig In Baseball high school team to a win at Harry Grove Stadium in Frederick, Md. against the Potomac Dawgs in the Battle of South Mountain Classic.

In baseball, look at Cal Ripken's son at South Carolina, redshirting his first season. Ryan Ripken is a 6-foot-5 first baseman who hit .377 and drove in 25 runs as a senior at Gilman High School in Baltimore last season, and was drafted in the 20th round by the Baltimore Orioles. For him, it's not academics—there's a player in his position in front of him.

But it's hard to blame parents for redshirting kids when \$75,000-\$100,000 college scholarships beckon, despite what Cohen says.

It is a question of integrity. As an associate scout for the Kansas City Royals, I'll tell you right now that a 17-year-old talented athlete has more upside than a "polished" 20-year-old, even if big-bodied players win more attention. But there's a case for the kid who played by the rules, didn't stay back, made the grade, and hung with the big dogs, to be noticed on the field of play.

At 17 (my birthday is July 29), I was able to win a University of Maryland scholarship and play against kids generally a year older. But if I was a marginal player and could only walk on at a Division III school to establish myself and then transfer to a Division I school, that year of development could be costly. So there's an argument for redshirting early.

I wouldn't go to the extreme, saying people who do it later are cheating. Cheating is a harsh word. It's something lighter—call it *giving yourself an unfair advantage*. Kids doubling up in eighth grade are getting an unfair advantage on counterparts who aren't or didn't. It doesn't even out, ever. They are always a full year ahead of their classmates. And when sophomore-junior year hits, they can drive on their own. They can drive to the batting cage, the practice field, the game—they get more freedom earlier, and that's good or bad.

I always stress academics, and put athletics second. Often, academics help you more from a scholarship standpoint than athletics, and that's a fact. To put athletics first, at least for aca-

demically astute student-athletes, does them a disservice. Why make a kid who gets straight-A's repeat eighth grade?

I do know that public and private schools in Maryland aren't on a level playing field. One private school places students in grades based on their birthdays. Another school realizes that if it holds students back, those students, even if they dominate on middle-school teams, have a better chance to play varsity their freshman year. Fewer years on varsity means less exposure, fewer chances to see better competition and less opportunity to be seen by college coaches.

It's easy to see how athletes in all sports are getting bigger and faster, as Duke's Professor Bejan points out. And that doesn't account for advances in training. This clearly puts undersized or yet-to-develop teens at a disadvantage. I understand how parents could see the frustration in their players as they try to keep up with larger counterparts and decide to "redshirt" their eighth grader just to keep up.

Holding back pays off. Three players I coached who are high school sophomores now, but could be juniors if they hadn't been held back in elementary school, are highly regarded prospects. Their parents gambled and won. College scholarships are highly likely.

But if you are a parent who cares what other people think, or you think others will judge you for your decision, you may not want to live with the fallout of a middle-school holdback. Sleep might not come as easy if you evaluate your decision this way. Perhaps that's another reason to help your player power through high school with the DNA he was born with and hope his academic and athletic careers deliver everything he needs.

Steve Ballance and Will Frazier are partners in *Dig In Baseball*, a Maryland baseball training, coaching and skills development organization with eight tournament-only teams and a college team competing during the summer in the Maryland Collegiate Baseball League. Write them at diginbaseball@gmail.com.



Photo: Johnny R. Jan