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HEADLINE: Specialization reluctant choice for 2-sport star

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Life is simpler for Jackie Santacaterina.

No more whiplash when she checks the calendar to decipher her practice and game schedules. No more guilt wondering if she's shortchanging one of her teams to play with another.

This doesn't mean she's completely happy. The Geneva sophomore believes it's a shame she skipped basketball this winter to focus on soccer. Her parents agree, so does girls basketball coach Todd Leden.

None of them, however, is angry about it or at each other. There is no villain here.

Santacaterina's decision to go from two-sport varsity standout to specialist is simply a commentary on what we have come to in high school sports and how complex the choices are that a kid may have to make before she's even old enough to drive.

As a freshman, Santacaterina started at point guard for a 16-11 Geneva basketball team and at forward for the Vikings' soccer team. In the fall of that year, however, she had made the elite Eclipse club soccer team, and that's when her sporting life got interesting.

During basketball season, she would practice soccer three to four times a

week with Eclipse or with her Geneva teammates in high school open gyms. The workload wore her down enough that her parents had her tested twice for mononucleosis, and although she was OK they fretted about how much was too much.

"Sometimes you wonder if you're doing the right thing," Jackie's father, Mike, said, "but she loves basketball and is passionate about soccer."

Jackie didn't mind her hectic schedule. What did bother her was the fallout from conflicting game schedules.

Eclipse played tournaments in various warm-weather locales last winter, and Jackie felt bad if she skipped them for basketball. But she missed a basketball game for a soccer event and regretted that, too, as well as having to sit out the first half of the subsequent basketball game under team rules.

"[Coaches] all want you for their own sport, so you can get better and be whatever," Jackie's mother, Mary Ellen, said. "I think there was a lot of pressure put on her inadvertently."

Last spring Leden asked Santacaterina how her dual schedules would fit during the summer and the next school year. The answer was, not very well. She would miss significant parts of Leden's summer program and, more important, also miss an increased number of basketball games if she competed in more Eclipse winter events.

Something had to give, and Jackie decided it would have to be basketball. Had Leden been able to accept her ideal schedule, she probably would have stuck with hoops.

"But I think it would have been really hard for him to do that," said Santacaterina, who, like her parents, praises Leden for being fair and consistent.

Jackie spent this basketball season watching her former teammates finish 20-8 without her, and while she suffered withdrawal pangs and second thoughts, she has no regrets. Her future, she believes, is in soccer.

"I don't think I could play basketball in college at a high level and I knew if I wanted to play college soccer at that level I had to make more of a commitment to that," she said.

Santacaterina faces one more tough decision: whether to give up high school soccer to focus solely on Eclipse. She will play for Geneva this spring but is taking it a year at a time.

"I love high school soccer," she said. "It's a good thing to experience." Leden still holds out faint hope Santacaterina will return to basketball. Her father wishes she would but realizes it's unlikely given how specialization has grown since he played two sports in the late 1970s.

"Jackie's situation is all too common in high school sports," he said. "The higher the level you participate in one sport the more the consequences are. "If she was not able to participate at this club level this wouldn't be an issue. It makes it complex."

Given the year-round demands of high school sports, it's hard enough for an athlete to play on two prep teams, let alone on a club team too.

"Kids have more opportunities now, which is good, but the flip side is the opportunities take them away from some high school sports," Leden said. "As a result each sport is improving, but I don't know if it's the best thing for kids."