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INDIANAPOLIS, IN (November 4, 2016) — A study conducted by the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health and funded by the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) Foundation revealed that high school athletes who specialize in a single sport sustain lower-extremity injuries at significantly higher rates than athletes who do not specialize in one sport.

The study was conducted throughout the 2015-16 school year at 29 high schools in Wisconsin involving more than 1,500 student-athletes equally divided between male and female participants. The schools involved in the study represented a mixture of rural (14), suburban (12) and urban (3) areas, and enrollments were equally diverse with 10 small schools (less than 500 students), 10 medium schools (501-1,000 students) and nine large schools (more than 1,000 students).

Athletes who specialized in one sport were twice as likely to report previously sustaining a lower-extremity injury while participating in sports (46%) than athletes who did not specialize (24%). In addition, specialized athletes sustained 60 percent more new lower-extremity injuries during the study than athletes who did not specialize. Lower-extremity injuries were defined as any acute, gradual, recurrent or repetitive-use injury to the lower musculoskeletal system.

“While we have long believed that sport specialization by high school athletes leads to an increased risk of overuse injury, this study confirms those beliefs about the potential risks of sport specialization,” said Bob Gardner, NFHS executive director. “Coaches, parents and student-athletes need to be aware of the injury risks involved with an overemphasis in a single sport.”

Among those who reported previously sustaining a lower-extremity injury, the areas of the

The student-athletes involved in the study were deemed “specialized” if they answered “yes” to at least four of the following six questions: 1) Do you train more than 75 percent of the time in your primary sport?; 2) Do you train to improve skill and miss time with friends as a result?; 3) Have you quit another sport to focus on one sport?; 4) Do you consider your primary sport more important than your other sports?; 5) Do you regularly travel out of state for your primary sport?; 6) Do you train more than eight months a year in your primary sport?

Although some sports (field hockey, lacrosse) are not offered in Wisconsin and were not included in the study, the study concluded that since specialization increased the risk of lower-extremity injuries in sports involved in the survey it would also likely increase the risk of injuries in sports that were not a part of the study.

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The NFHS, based in Indianapolis, Indiana, is the national leadership organization for high school sports and performing arts