

Overuse problems persist

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By DR. ROBERT WEIL Columnist

In the June 7th Sports Illustrated magazine, one of the country's best known and respected sports orthopedic surgeons is quoted "we're seeing kids hurt before they even have a chance to become athletes".

The article by Mark Hyman, author of "Until it Hurts": America's obsession with Youth sports and how it harms our kids, stresses the serious rise of youth sports injuries many that require surgery. Dr. James Andrews, who has operated on some of the most famous professional athletes in all sports for decades says, "I don't think epidemic is too strong a word." He says that over 60 percent of the athletes he does surgery on are high school age or younger. He has helped start an organization called STOP, (Sports trauma and Overuse prevention). Athletes like Bo Jackson, Charles Barkley, Jack Nicklaus, Tom Brady and others have joined Dr. Andrews as spokespersons to help get the word and information out.

Large amounts of injuries to young athletes that require surgery are of course of real concern but as much if not more attention is focused on one of my favorite topics -- overuse injuries. Previous generations didn't suffer anywhere near the amount of overuse sports injuries. Today, it's a new game. At younger and younger ages, youngsters become serious everyday athletes. What I like to call the prodigy sports (there are a lot of them), can be dancers, skating, baseball, tennis, soccer, etc. The tendency to play more and more games, more and more practices, more intense schedules are all common denominators.

The question of whether youngsters should concentrate on one sport or at what age -- has always sparked discussion. Parents often feel that if "my kid doesn't pay attention full time to one sport, they'll fall behind." In an ideal world, young athletes wouldn't have these pressures. When something hurts, they could back off and take some "intelligent rest" (one of my favorite terms). Reality is that pressure from everywhere (themselves, parents, coaches, trainers) is real. This is often when abuse of over the counter pain medicines and anti-inflammatories starts. You'd be surprised to see how many young athletes need medicine to continue to participate. I tell parents all the time "if your youngster needs these medicines to continue to participate in the sport or training, you're over the line" you need to identify the problem, and back off the amount and intensity of activity.

Often it's what I call the "terrible two's", that initially are responsible for overuse injuries. (Too much activity, too much running, jumping, etc.) too much activity too soon, too much intensity. Any of these can lead to the shin splints, plantar fasciitis, knee tendonitis, Achilles problems, etc., that make up a lot of overuse injuries. "Intelligent rest", some ice or heat, depending on the indications, some anti-inflammatories like Advil or Aleve all can help. When lower extremity problems persist, or are repetitive, then I'm looking at foot structure and mechanics. Over 75 percent of the overuse persistent problems I see at all ages, in all sports is over pronation foot related. The flat foot tendency can create motion related tendon and joint problems. High arch feet also create problems. Prescription orthotics continues to be my best remedy for related overuse injuries. I like to add physical therapy, massage, and acupuncture as valuable additions for most problems. These help with healing, rehabilitating and strengthening whatever the injury was.

- Congratulations to Naperville's Olympic champion skater Evan Lysacek for his runner-up finish on "Dancing with the Stars" May 26th. It's amazing how he combined the dancing and skating tour simultaneously. It's been some 3½ months since he won the gold medal, jumped into DWTS, and made it to the final two. Olympic parties, three DWTS parties and celebrations later, it will be interesting to see what Evan will do next. Hey Evan -- thanks for the ride!