New Jersey Youth Soccer

Youth Soccer's Dilemma: Is more actually better?

by Rick Meana - Director of Coaching

Is more actually better?

Nope, the direct opposite according to sports medicine doctors is actually the case. No two words have raised more concerns amongst those in the sports medicine field recently than overuse injuries.

According to most of the Sports Medicine Professionals I have spoken to recently report that just 15 years ago, overuse injuries accounted for 20% of patients visiting their clinics, now it's up to 70% and increasing year after year! What is interesting to note is that over training, early specialization and too little rest and recovery all contribute to overuse injuries. What is even more interesting to note (and very troubling) is that they point to the "youth soccer club mentality" for the "epidemic" that is affecting all youth sports across the board!

Overuse injuries develop when tissue is injured due to repetitive loading of a muscle, bone, tendon, ligament, that is too much physical activity and too little rest and recovery. It is also defined as the cumulative effect of many tiny injuries that cause pain and loss of function. Close to half of the injuries reported regarding youth soccer are overuse injuries!

So Why Are Kids Being Pushed To Play Sports So Hard?

Parents? Coaches? Or a combination of the two? Are they being lead to believe they can get a college scholarship?

''It's amazing how many parents project their children at professional levels,'' says Vern D. Seefeldt, director emeritus of the Institute for the Study of Youth Sports

at Michigan State. Coaches feed the frenzy too. When a soccer guru urges playing another tourney or ratcheting up practice time, parents often don't object. They're being told by the coach: “Your son has amazing potential and needs to continue to improve”. “There are few people guiding the parents who have the welfare of the child at stake,'' says Dr. Eric Small, head of the Sports Medicine Center for Young Athletes in Mount Kisco, N.Y., and author of “Kids & Sports”. Here is what Dr. Small says, “Making the injury list even longer is the trend toward sport specialization. A decade ago a peppy 10-year-old might divide his play among soccer, basketball, and baseball seasons. Now more are being channeled to one sport that they play year-round. The extra training improves skills but adds to the wear and tear.”

One of the most popular women’s soccer stars Mia Hamm's parents encouraged her to play a variety of sports. When high school soccer season ended, she played as a point guard on the basketball team. ''I was a terrible shot, but fast,'' says Hamm. ''My dad never said: 'Go out and work on soccer.' The decisions about playing came from me.'' Hamm tells parents and kids to avoid early specialization.

All over the country Sports Medicine Professionals are advising parents to closely monitor how much time their children are putting in to organized sports. Be leery of the number of hours that coaches may be demanding to play and train. Parents are so focused on their kids being superstars that they think they're doing a service when training jumps from 10 hours a week to 30. They love their child, but they have blinders on. Dr. Small goes on to say, ''Often those blinders don't come off until a youngster gets hurt, but by then a youngsters sports career could be over.”

A Watch List for Parents, Coaches and Administrators

More Is Not Better

Many injuries occur when organized practice time is ratcheted up from two days a week to five. A good

rule of thumb to follow is physical activity should not be increased to more than 10% a week.

Be Aware Of Growth Spurts
As kids grow, muscles can become less flexible and more susceptible to injury. Parents should watch for periods of rapid growth.

Early Specialization Leads To Muscle Imbalances
Kids who play one sport year-round develop certain muscles to deal with the demands of that particular sport while others remain weak. A well balanced conditioning program of playing a variety of different sports and proper rest in between activity is healthy.

When There Is Pain There Is No Gain
Child athletes and parents shouldn't ignore the warning signs assuming that injuries will magically go away. Have a doctor check out any minor pains in joints or bones before they become major ones.

Signs of Overuse: Weakness, Loss of Flexibility, Chronic Pain, Inflammation, Swelling. The inflammation is actually a degeneration of tissue caused by the micro trauma Some others: Loss of Performance, (Hard to differentiate between a 'bad day' and overuse injury). "I don't know, its just a little sore", "I don't remember getting hurt"
Soreness after workout is normal but it should dissipate after a day or 2 and soreness, aching and limping lasting 3 days or more may indicate overuse. The overuse injury is a process, and will take time to develop, starting 3 or 4 weeks into a season. Muscles affected by overuse injury tend to be tighter, more irritable and will become prone to an acute injury.

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