

Build support around high-performance youngsters

You know, after watching the incredible U.S. Men's Figure Skating Championships last week with Naperville's Evan Lysacek winning his second straight title, taking the gold over rival Johnny Weir with unbelievable tie scores, but superior free skate - wow!

I've worked with Evan since he was 11 years old and he's always been a high-performance athlete. Figure skating is but one of numerous sports in which young kids are serious athletes. Tennis, gymnastics, ballet and dance, volleyball, soccer and swimming are other examples. That's in addition to those who compete for their schools.

Usually I consider serious to be when daily sports activity is done, sometimes year-round.

Most of these kids are already specializing in one sport. I've discussed with lots of experts about multi-sport athletes versus

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The Sports Doctor



specializing at young ages and there are points to both sides of the equation.

There is no doubt that specializing leads to overuse problems - same muscles, same motions - but what is important is, what does the young athlete want? If the passion is one activity, then OK. If it's two or three sports, that's OK, too.

But paying attention to adding off-sport training becomes important. There has been an impressive growth of training and consulting for young athletes. You've got to make sure the trainer, physical therapist or coach is qualified. Physical therapy groups such as Athletico, which are all over Chicago and the suburbs, have screenings and pro-

grams for young athletes. As Evan developed into a champion, his off-ice conditioning was as important as his skating. So were mental training and proper nutrition.

I've also talked often about orthotics, prescription shoes and with Evan skate inserts to optimally position and support the feet, ankles and knees. Optimum balance and stability are another advantage of orthotics. The foot affects everything above, so paying attention to the young athlete's foot mechanics, leg shape and leg length is important.

Almost all routine sports physicals leave out evaluating foot mechanics and function. Most foot types - including flat feet and high arches - are inherited, so often if the parents have had foot or knee or back problems, we might see the same problems develop.

Orthotics have made a difference with some of

the best volleyball players around. Sports Performance Volleyball in Aurora has won national and international titles for more than 20 years. I do screenings there during the season and we've had great success with orthotics for decades. So many persistent shin splint and knee problems are related to foot mechanics, as are hip and lower back issues.

High-performance adolescent athletes almost always have great parent and family support. It takes time, money and energy to keep them going. And the younger an athlete is exposed to the mental side of sports, the better.

Evan has always had access to sports psychology and mental training, and it's a big positive. Relaxing, focusing and thinking positive images are all trainable skills. Any kid competing on a serious level will benefit.

Coaches also are very important; some young athletes spend more time with them than their parents. This is almost always a posi-



Nati Harnik / The Associated Press

Naperville native Evan Lysacek, the two-time defending U.S. men's figure skating champion, has been looking after the health of his lower body with the help of Dr. Robert Weil, a Sun guest columnist.

itive thing, but taking time to meet and get to know the coach is smart. Even if your

kid is a star, that youngster's experiences with the coach should be enriching. This is not always possible, especially with team sports, but it's a good goal.

A few months ago, I talked about the new sports medicine, a multidiscipline team of expertise available for prevention and treatment of sports-related inju-

Pediatricians should be aware of whether a young patient is a serious athlete. Sports podiatry can evaluate foot and leg alignment, and a physical therapist, athletic training coach or sports conditioning coach can develop the right off-sport program. Experts in sports psychology and nutrition are available as well.

Hey, you never know when the next Evan Lysacek will come around.

Dr. Robert Weil is a sports podiatrist with an office in Aurora. You can hear him on his weekly radio show at 6:30 p.m. Thursdays on 90.9-FM. Contact him at drweilsportsdoctor@yahoo.com.