

Olympians have plenty of support – including from their feet

From the sports medicine point of view, the Beijing Olympics were really something. You have to be in awe of these athletes, their incredible drive to succeed, their competitive spirit and their achievements.

From kids as young as a 14-year-old diver, to 16-year-old gymnastic medalists, to 41-year-old swimmers, the variety of athletes and sports is amazing.

The phenomenon of Michael Phelps was incredible. Everything from living up to

near-impossible expectations to the physical and mental demands of his schedule – 17 races in eight days – was something to watch. I think he needed those 12,000 calories a day to just be on time.

He said all along he wanted to do something “no one else has done,” and that he did. His mom, Debbie, who is almost as famous as he is, is another example of the endless support and love the parents and relatives of these athletes contribute.

Gymnastics was another amazing example of how powerful, acrobatic and fearless these athletes are. The Chinese team of gold-medal winners, kids who were being suspected of being underage, brings up the question: How can these 14- and 15-year-olds be so world-class so young?

Even starting these children as early as 5 and 6 years old, it's nuts that they can be “women's champions” as adolescents. We've seen girls such as 16-year-old Shawn Johnson and 18-year-old Nastia Liukin

cement their status as the Olympics' top gymnasts with wonder. Coaches knew these girls were something special by the time they were 10 years old.

It's true that this kind of pressure cooker is not for the weak-hearted; these athletes are unique. Parents ask often how early is too early for young athletes to begin that long road toward being an Olympian?

It's a great question because even if there is special talent, love for the sport by the youngster and great coaching by trained teachers, it's still one in a million.

Johnson started at age 6½. Evan Lysacek, a Naperville native and two-time U.S. men's figure skating champion, started at about 7. Phelps was about 11 when his coach knew he was something special.

One of the great challenges in sports medicine has always been and remains dealing with these young, growing bodies while intense, repetitive training is done. Besides traumatic injuries, which are always

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possible, it's the repetitive overuse injuries that make it so challenging.

Feet, ankles, knees – so much running, jumping and pounding. Shoulders, elbows, backs – miles and miles of swimming.

Along those lines, let's applaud all the medical, training, therapy and coaching experts who work so tirelessly keeping these athletes healthy – it's a herculean task.

I'm sure the whole Olympics experience will be a tremendous motivator for the full blast back to school sports seasons. Here are some things to keep in mind for all the young athletes, parents and coaches.

■ Foot mechanics and structure are important. Many persistent ankle, shin, knee and back problems are foot-related.

■ Proper foot and ankle strengthening helps in all sports.

■ Get the proper shoes for your foot type and make sure they fit properly.

■ Foot type – flat feet, high arches, etc. – is mostly inherited. If Mom or Dad has problems, check the kids.

■ Keep communication lines open. Know if your kids are hurting and why, and discuss schedules and intensity with coaches.

■ If the kids need pain relievers consistently just to participate or “keep up,” something's wrong. I continue our free foot mechanics screenings at my Aurora office. Call 630-898-3505 for information.

Preventing injuries and enhancing performance remain the goals. Good luck to all this upcoming school season!

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