

'Intelligent rest' important for young athletes

By Robert Weil Feb 16, 2011 2:36PM

If you're a pro athlete and getting paid millions of dollars, you're expected to learn to play with pain. I really don't know when and where that started, but it's still not smart.

Minor injuries can become worse or recur because athletes don't back off when they're hurt. I like to call the opposite approach "intelligent rest." It's not an exact science, and evaluating the injury and setting expectations and time frames requires some thinking. This can be tough to do because the pressure is always on — from coaches, parents, teams and the athletes themselves.

This dilemma is one of sports medicine's greatest challenges — how to get the athlete back into action with not really enough time to heal.

What's alarming is how often this same "no-time-off" philosophy is applied to youth sports. The more serious the sport, the more difficult it is to get enough rest and recovery. Today, many sports are year round, factoring in club and school seasons. If it is the offseason, there are always sports conditioning and weight-training activities.

Specialization at younger and younger ages is almost the norm now. And not surprisingly, some overuse problems or injuries are the result of too much repetitive motion. One of the great ironies in pro, college and top-level amateur sports is that while athletes often get the best care, they almost never get enough healing and recovery time. Of course, very few of us are professional or even high-level amateur athletes, but the need for proper rest and recovery time is still important.

Recreational athletes who do aerobic, running, resistance and strength exercises often fall into the same mistake patterns — engaging in more activity more often with greater intensity than they should. The key is to listen to your body. If you're consistently tired or dealing with persistent soreness and pain, you need to back off. Reduce the amount and intensity of the workout and allow things to calm down.

For example, if you're a jogger or runner who experiences pain, become a walker for a week or so. If problems persist, see somebody who can evaluate your problem and recommend a solution. If a young athlete complains of or displays persistent pain or discomfort, the parent needs to step in and prescribe some "intelligent rest." Seek out a diagnosis, treatment and sensible guidelines for a return to action from a sports doctor or therapist.

Proper amounts of rest and recovery are essential keys to injury prevention and enhanced performance. As I've mentioned often, many persistent lower extremity problems are foot mechanics related, so if that describes you or your child, check it out.

Acupuncture

In the never-ending quest for healing and recovery, I often recommend acupuncture. This ancient oriental healing art has definitely shown that it's helpful with sports injuries both acute and chronic.

Acupuncture involves the body as an energy system and has virtually no side effects or drugs.

P.S. Olympic figure-skating gold medalist and Naperville native Evan Lysacek, my favorite orthotics superstar since he was 10 years old, is coming March 12 to Allstate Arena with "Stars on Ice." Hope to see many of you there.

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