

Back to school, back to action: Play safe

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Robert Weil

Editor's note: Dr. Robert Weil is moving from sports to Mind & Body, where he'll have a chance to reach more readers and talk about new issues. The Sun is excited about the move. Catch Weil's column the third week of the month.

Chris Fox, my co-host on the Sports Doctor Radio Show, and I often talk about how impressive the high school sports teams are in our areas. Pick any sport this fall — football, girls volleyball, cross country, girls tennis, soccer — or for that matter, any season, and we've got some of the best.

Hopefully, all athletes were well tuned in to the important mixture of summer training, "intelligent rest" and recovery time. Too often, the "more is better" syndrome overwhelms the necessity of time off from what often is year-round playing, training and practice. I feel that one of the most important arts of sports medicine is the constant balance of smart, aggressive schedules and overuse.

A classic example at the highest level of sports is young pitching phenom Stephen Strasburg of the Washington Nationals. Even surrounded (hopefully) by all sorts of sports medicine experts, coming out of college with almost unprecedented hype, throwing 100 mph — first shoulder woes, a few weeks off, rehab, return — torn forearm tendon ... major Tommy John surgery! Was he over-pushed? Good question.

With new attention on concussions in high schoolers and younger athletes, one important point made is the youngster not telling (for various reasons) their coach, trainer or parents that symptoms are present. Even though most overuse injury concerns aren't nearly as serious as concussions, that reluctance to report symptoms is of concern. I often hear from a young athlete that his or her foot, ankle, shin, knee, etc., hurts but "I can't back off. My coach or parent doesn't listen. They will get mad; I'll get cut." Many times, it's self pressure that's involved.

I've rarely met young athletes (all levels included) faking discomfort. Pay attention. This is where the reliance on drugs, usually over-the-counter pain meds and anti-inflammatories, starts. There are exceptions, but a good rule is, if your kids need these drugs to keep in the action, you're pushing over the line. As I've mentioned in many previous articles, in the lower extremities, if injuries and problems persist or don't respond to rest and treatment, pay attention to foot mechanics. Go to my website, www.sportsdoctorradio.com/radio_shows.html, and read about orthotics and overuse injuries.

Boy, there were some great responses to Aug. 11's article, "Which sports have the best athletes?" Thanks to all who responded — here are a few brief examples:

Brad Wolf: Motocross racers face some of the most physically and mentally challenging demands. They are great athletes.

Debbie Konopka: Triathletes are the best; they have to master, train, and compete in three very different sports.

Carley Bolea: Figure skaters, and Evan Lysacek in particular.

Ellen Kukucha: I say figure skating. After watching skating and having done all sports from marathons, gymnastics, swimming, and equestrian, skating is the most challenging.

Marla Brown: Being an Evan fan, he's quite something, but after much consideration, and participating in many sports, my vote goes to water polo and its incredible athletic demands. Feet never touch the bottom, constantly treading water.

Ken Suchomel: Best athletes are pole vaulters; strength, speed, agility. Remember superstars on TV? Pole vaulters won numerous times (athletes from different sports competing against each other).

Abby Wilson: Evan Lysacek — I believe his accomplishment of Olympic, world and Grand Prix championships in the same year is unprecedented. And yes, his pre-eminence as an athlete was very conspicuous in "Dancing with the Stars," from competing with broken toes and a concussion, to touring simultaneously with Stars on Ice. (She went into great detail with some additional insights that were so good that I forwarded her e-mail to Tanya, Evan's mom.)

Steve Thomas: Hockey. Constant speed, explosive, agility.

Anyway, like I said last month, everyone has an opinion. At the top levels, they're all great athletes.

Dr. Robert Weil is a sports podiatrist from Naperville 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 and visit his website at sportsdoctorradio.com.