

October 6, 2008 Monday
L2 Edition

SECTION: NEWS; Pg. 10

HEADLINE: Helping our teen athletes in the long run

In 1980, about 10 percent of young athletes were injured as a result of overuse during competitions. A recent study said that number rose to 70 percent by 2005.

That's just too high. It's time for parents and coaches to recognize that the pressure to succeed in sports has a cost to the young athlete — a cost that is not worth it.

Look at the list of ailments that overuse injuries — defined as breakdowns caused by repetitive stress on a single body part — can cause: bursitis, tendinitis, shin splints, stress fractures. Surgeries to replace a damaged elbow ligament — named after former professional pitcher Tommy John — have increased to the point that almost a third of such patients are younger than 18.

"The heartbreaking thing for me is all of these overuse injuries are preventable," said Dr. Cynthia LaBella, director of the Institute for Sports Medicine at Children's Memorial Hospital in Chicago, as reported by the Daily Herald's Robert McCoppin in today's Health and Fitness section. "If people would follow our guidelines, we could really make some progress."

The guidelines she refers to are set by the American Academy of Pediatrics Council on Sports Medicine and Fitness. We urge all parents, coaches and athletes to review them and understand them.

Among the risk factors are athletes that play one sport year-round; playing that sport seven days a week; playing multiple games in a day.

If the athlete has a persistent pain or nagging injury or if the athlete has problems with motivation, fatigue or school, those could be warning signs of overuse.

To reduce your child's risk, insist he or she take at least one or two days off each week and

two to three months off from a sport each year. Also, limit increases in training time and intensity.

For younger athletes, concentrating on one sport before puberty could lead to overuse injuries. And finally, all parents and coaches should emphasize that playing sports is more about improving skills safely, good sportsmanship and fun than it is about winning or about getting a college scholarship.

"Instead of being kids, they're becoming little athletes," said Prospect High School trainer Matt Guth, who looks to parents to set limits. "Sometimes they need to be kids and play for fun, and not for scholarships when they're only 12 years old."

While baseball players, especially pitchers, are prone to overuse injuries it also occurs regularly among swimmers, tennis players and volleyball players. Little League Baseball puts limits on how often a pitcher can pitch but no limits exist in the other sports.

Setting limits may be a good place to start as medical experts try to deal with the injuries that occur from those sports.

And setting realistic expectations is a good place to start for parents who need to understand that scholarship money for athletes is rare. The long-term health of their child should remain paramount in their minds as they determine sports' participation.

