

*In the quest for victory, prowess and scholarships,
Too many children are getting injured.*

SETTING LIMITS FOR YOUNG ATHLETES

By B.G.Kelly

Ok, your 10- or 12-year-old son or daughter sees Michael Jordan or Sheryl Swoopes work all these wonderful, breathtaking moves on a basketball court. *Wow!* Now they want to be just like Mike and Sheryl.

So they join a team, maybe two teams, perhaps three, to build their skills and become a star. And they play in three, four, maybe five leagues.

Not good, according to pediatric orthopedic specialist at Temple University's Center for Sports Medicine. "Too many kids are playing too many games in too many leagues," he says. It doesn't matter if it's basketball or soccer or football or baseball. When a kid's body is pushed too far, too often, too hard, the repetitive stress catches up with the immature muscle-skeletal system.

Case in point: A 12-year old Little League pitcher complained of soreness in his arm yet continued to pitch for three teams in youth baseball leagues. No one, not his coach, nor his parents, recognized that he needed rest. Finally, after one toss too many, the kid's arm snapped and he collapsed in pain. X-rays revealed that the humerus bone in his upper arm had broken in two.

So it's no wonder injury rates in sports for children 5 to 14 have risen in the last five years.

More than 22 million kid's are playing sports these days, and playing them with more frequency and intensity than ever before. Each year about 13 million kids get hurt while participation in sports, and more than a million require a trip to a hospital emergency room.

According to the latest National Electronic Injury Surveillance System report, put out by the U.S. Consumers Product Safety Commission, sports injuries occasioning visits to an emergency room among kids between 5 and 14 were up across the board from 1990 to 1995:

- For soccer players, up 12,000 to 70,475;
- For baseball and softball players, up 700 to 140,934;
- For football players, up 70,000 to 178,763;
- For basketball players, up 51,000 to 211,181.

What's going on?

The reasons go beyond the physical and physiological. In America, popular culture (especially sports) send this message to us: Reach for the heavens, grasp what you can, seize every opportunity, *WIN*.

Well-meaning but overzealous coaches push kids to remain better than – or at least on a par with – their peers.

Overzealous parents urge their children to play in league after league, sports camp after sports camp. They want their kids to become stars, winners, to get that scholarship.

And overzealous kids not only want stardom and all its rewards but also the approval of their coaches and parents.

“It’s a tragedy is what it is,” says Jimmy Rogers, a certified athletic trainer and director of community outreach program for Temple’s Center for Sports Medicine. Rogers is on a mission to educate youth league coaches, volunteers and parents in the prevention, recognition and emergency treatment of youth sports injuries.

“We’ve been successful in teaching trainers and coaches at the high school and college levels – one reason the number of injuries to these age groups has decreased in the last five years,” Roger says. “Now, we need to focus our attention at the youth level.”

What Rogers is preaching – and hoping coaches and parents listen to with the ear of disciples – is to recognize and address the reasons directly related to the rise in youth sports injuries:

OVERUSE. Playing five, six times a week in multiple leagues is far too demanding for a child’s underdeveloped body.

THE TRICKLE-DOWN EFFECT. Many youth coaches employ training techniques used by winning professional, college and high school programs. As a result, muscularly and skeletally immature bodies are being asked to endure far too advanced training methods.

DIFFERENCES IN MATURITY LEVELS. Not all kids are equal. Some kids of the same age are less developed than others.

THE FALLACY OF NO PAIN, NO GAIN. Kids, coaches and parents sometimes buy into the notion of “playing through pain.” And why not? They see their favorite athletics doing it.

“The most effective cure in youth sports for an injury is rest,” Roger said. “The sooner you take it, the less rest you have to take. Skip it, and the consequences are traumatic.”

What, after all, do we want to get out of sports? If the answer is prizes, trophies, championship, all-league awards, scholarships and winning above all else, then there is little hope of reducing sports injuries to our kids.

But if we measure the benefit of sport not by the scoreboard or the trophy case but by other goals, such as stimulating skeletal growth, improving muscle strength, increasing flexibility, promoting cardiovascular and respiratory fitness, gaining new skills, enjoying sport, learning sportsmanship, meeting new friends, and building character, then all kids, coaches and parents can become winners.

That’s not to say we ditch the effort to win. Rather, let’s ditch the obsession over winning and the excesses that accompany it.

If coaches and parents can become better informed about ways to prevent, recognize and manage sports injuries – while realizing that the value in sport transcends the score – we have a real chance to reverse the mounting trend of injuries in youth sport.

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