

“It’s Gonna be May”

If April showers Bring May Flowers, what do May flowers bring.... youth sports!

Now that the weather is getting nicer, more children are participating in organized youth sports!

At certain times throughout the year, usually toward the middle-end of the Fall and spring sports season, I will start seeing upticks in patients with Sever’s Disease. When these youth athletes come in, it is very common for them to report playing on a year-round travel soccer team (sometimes multiple different teams concurrently) and then also playing on the school soccer team in the fall, Basketball team in winter, and baseball in the spring! While youth sports participation has many short and long term physical and mental health benefits, if kids are pushed into over-participation, overtraining, and early sports specialization it increases their risk of negative health effects such as increased rate of overuse injury, burnout, and they can become less likely to continue active lifestyles into adulthood.

I’m sure, just like I have, many of you have had difficulties with the conversation between kids, parents, coaches, and/or sports organizations when there is a youth athlete who is injured and either over-participation or early specialization is the obvious cause from a doctor’s standpoint. The difficulty of the conversation being having the families actually take your instructions and information to heart. The struggle sometimes is the youth sports organizations themselves, especially the ones that seem to almost function like a pyramid scheme, promising kids more playing time only if they join this team before they can do this other team, before they can travel, have to pay for this skills summer camp, and told if they don’t do all of those steps then it will be hard to get recruited to play in college.

As we are treating kids with overuse injuries, here are some important points to discuss:

- Studies have shown that youth athletes who specialize in one sport were at a significant risk of injuries compared to youth athletes who sample multiple sports.
- Without opportunities to experience sport diversification, children may not fully develop neuromuscular patterns that may be protective of injury.
- Early/Current data that shows that “free play” outside of endurance running should be encouraged for preadolescent runners and that Free play has been shown to improve the development of motor skills, stability, cardiorespiratory fitness, and cognitive health in runners.
- 97% of professional athletes believed being a multisport athlete was beneficial to their success.
- In a German study, 88% of Olympians reported participating in more than 1 sport as a child.
 - The notable exceptions were those sports where the top tier of competition tended to be during teenage years such as gymnastics, figure skating, and diving.
- Diversification of sports during childhood results in increased long-term participation, increased adult performance, and increased personal development.
- Allowing for unstructured free play is positively correlated with improved all-around sport performance, better neuromuscular patterns, and coordination.

How is early Sports Specialization defined? The AOSSM offers this definition:

- Participation in intensive training and/or competition in organized sports greater than 8 months per year
- Participation in 1 sport to the exclusion of participation in other sports and limited free play overall

- Involving prepubertal children (~7th grade or roughly age 12 years and younger)

What recommendations should be given regarding participation in youth sports? Here are some guidelines taken from the AAP and NATA:

- Delay specializing in a single sport for as long as possible.
 - Strongly discouraged before puberty
- Limiting each specific sporting activity to five days per week
 - Total of 5 days including competitive play, sport-specific training, and scrimmages
 - 1-2 days per week of rest from all organized sport activity
- One team at a time: Adolescent and young athletes should participate in only one organized sport per season.
- There Should be Less than eight months per year in a single sport.
 - Should have at least 2-3 months off from organized sports per year.
- Adolescent and young athletes should spend time away from organized sport/activity at the end of each competitive season.
- The weekly training time, number of repetitions, and total distance should not increase by more than 10 percent each week.
- Hours per week in a structured specific single sport/activity should not exceed the child's age.
- Encourage Periods of "unstructured play."

P.S. There was a typo in my April Newsletter that was pointed out, it was purely a typo! There was a sentence that referenced the first Sub-2 hour marathon, but Sub-3 hour was typed in error and I did not catch it during my proofread.