

UPMC Young Athlete Program Seeks to Alleviate Little League Injuries



by Elizabeth Pagel-Hogan

If you played recreational or little league sports as a child you would be surprised at the changes in youth athletics that have occurred in the past two decades. One of the most startling changes is the skyrocketing rate of surgeries on high school athletes already showing degenerative tendon damage.

UPMC Sports Medicine recently introduced the Young Athlete Program to address the needs of the youngest competitors.

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control, high school athletes rack up an estimated 2 million injuries and 500,000 doctor visits and 30,000 hospitalizations annually. In response to these statistics the American Orthopaedic Society for Sports Medicine (AOSSM) initiated STOP (Sports Trauma and Overuse Prevention) Sports Injuries campaign in early 2007.

"This is a national issue, the competitive play of young athletes," explained Tara Ridge, from the UPMC Centers for Rehab Services. "They are playing year round and specializing in a sport. 15 years ago they might have been competing a few months out of the year and in the past they switched sports throughout the year, muscle groups developed differently. Now they are specialized and there are imbalances and overuse injuries."

Ridge noted a rise in doctor visits, physical therapy and surgeries. The Young Athlete Program hopes to provide services complementary to what pediatricians have traditionally offered coupled with parental education.

"We've taken the expertise of managing a patient and coupled it with managing the athlete," explained Ridge. "Let's 9 year old develops shoulder and elbow pain from baseball. Pediatricians are trained in triaging and ruling out injuries so they might order an x-ray. The x-ray doesn't show an injury so the pediatrician says the child can return to play when pain stops. The child returns to play and experiences a flare up of injury."

"But from our perspective there's usually a mechanical reason for pain," Ridge continued. "That 9 year old is playing 3 games a weekend, throwing 120 pitches,

and the mechanical problem adds up."

The top three sports that lead to overuse injuries, according to Ridge, are baseball, swimming and running.

"Baseball especially is an asymmetrical, unilateral biased sport. They are not balancing things out. That's been the biggest issue," said Ridge.

The Young Athlete Program also contains an educational component. Therapists and physicians are devising ways to explain to a competitive nine year old that fixing a mechanical problem now can mean playing and performing longer.

"We're working on developing the most effective way to educate this population. They don't always have the maturity to manage their injuries and rehab." To effectively address these injuries, parents need to know about programs like Young Athlete.

To reach parents, UPMC Sports Medicine has been relying on educating their athletic training staff in over 50-60 local high schools as well as experimenting with new technology.

"We're developing a sports medicine app specific to baseball players - a one-stop shop on pre-season training with video, FAQs on managing acute injuries and a tracking mechanism for things associated with overuse injuries," Ridge said. "Little League has to count the number of pitches thrown based on age group but those pitch counts don't cross over when you're kid crosses over to multiple leagues." This app would allow parents to monitor cumulative pitches, both in and out of competition.

Staff from the Young Athlete Program have eagerly accepted invitations to share their services at community events and they are working to educate pediatricians as well as parents.

"Sports injury management is so specialized it hasn't been part of pediatrician's training," said Ridge. So UPMC Sports Medicine hosted a CEU session to educate local practices.

"We know parents are expecting pediatricians to provide best available resources but we're not sure that's always happening. We are looking for ways to make the process of care to be seamless," said Ridge.

For more information visit UPMCSportsMedicine.com.

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