

# Over-use injuries big concern

BY JIM COFFMAN  
STAFF WRITER

Something akin to awe crept into Dr. Preston Wolin's voice as he described a few of the injuries he has seen lately at the Center for Athletic Medicine in Chicago.

Wolin, who grew up in Glencoe, has been the director of the center since 1991. For the longest time virtually all of the pediatric injuries treated there resulted from a singular trauma causing a break or a strain.

In the last 10 years, that has begun to change. Local orthopedic physicians and trainers are seeing more and more injuries resulting from chronic over-use. And most blame a sports culture in which more and more young athletes are specializing, playing the games their parents believe could best lead to college scholarships to the exclusion of all others.

"I had a 14-year-old baseball player in here who, just from throwing, had a torn labrum," said Wolin during a recent interview. "A few years ago that would have been unheard of."

Then there was the 15-year-old pitcher who "tore his ulnar collateral ligament and had to have Tommy John surgery" in which a tendon from another part of the body or from a donor is used to stabilize the elbow.

That surgery has become relatively common for major league or even college pitchers. But now doctors are seeing the sort of damage that leads to it in younger and younger arms.

Wolin previously worked with the director of the Boston Children's Hospital sports medicine division, Dr. Lyle Micheli, who was a pioneer in the identification and treatment of "Little League elbow" many decades ago. He blamed a rise in arm injuries on young pitchers throwing breaking balls too early in their career.

Micheli recently spoke to the national trend in orthopedic sports injuries, noting that 25 years ago only 10 percent of the patients he saw had suffered over-use injuries. Treating those sorts of injuries now represents 70 percent of his practice. Other doctors in other regions have reported a similar shift.

The same trend is unfolding locally and Jeff Hay, a former trainer for the Chicago Bears who is now a regional facility manager and certified athletic trainer for AthletiCo, calls it a "in the last five years" thing. AthletiCo, which specializes in outpatient physical therapy services, has set up offices throughout the Chicagoland area, including Evanston, Glenview, Niles and Wheeling.

"With the proliferation of travel teams and private clubs and the pressure to be involved in team sports at the high school and junior high level. . . I just heard about a basketball travel team that plays 80 games in the summer," said Hay.

"And kids who are 10 to 17 years old are high risk. Kids suffering over-use injuries definitely seems to be picking up speed.

"Half the kids we see suffer over-use injuries and most of them could've been prevented," Hay added. "A coordinated effort is needed to combat this problem."

It is one in which coaches and trainers work together for the best interests of the athlete, establishing some common sense limits, instituting programs to ensure athletes are properly warmed up and they engage in balanced training.

Mindee Epstein, the former Niles East tennis star who went on to win a Big Ten singles title and has operated her Tip Top training center out of the Glenbrook Racquet Club in Northbrook for 15 years, stresses balance above all else.

"We see the same stuff with athletes not training the opposite muscles," Epstein says. She has long worked with a majority of tennis players (such as Michigan standout Ryan Heller, who won a state singles championship for Glenbrook North), but lately is seeing more and more athletes from other sports.

"Whether it's basketball, tennis or golf, everything is going forward. If you're going to have balance (and avoid injuries), you need to work the backwards stuff."

Hay speaks of personalized strength and stretching routines set up for athletes of all ages. He also outlines exactly how young athletes who have suffered injuries should be brought back to full speed after they have been out for a while.

Trainers can't prevent all injuries, but they can certainly minimize the risk. Another factor Hay points to is so simple, far too many people seem to miss it.

"For some kids some rest time is more valuable than stretches" or other forms of training. "I had a kid come in recently who had knee pain throughout the basketball season and now she had moved on to soccer and the pain had persisted," said Hay. "I asked how much rest she had taken between seasons and she said 'a day.'"

The most important thing is don't overdo it.

Epstein made note of a recent report in one of the Chicago dailies about 10-year-old children working with personal trainers and noted the potential reward won't out-weigh the drawbacks.

At the other end of the age spectrum was one of the tennis players Epstein has worked with, who recently returned from her Division I college team with a severe back injury. "They blew her back out, the strength and conditioning people there," said the local kinesiotherapist. "There are clearly (people in that field) who are undereducated."

One last critical component to injury minimization is communication. Trainers have to be in touch with strength coaches and high school coaches to make sure an athlete's overall program flows smoothly together.

Efforts are underway to try to reverse the trend toward specialization. The American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons and the National Athletic Trainers' Association have announced a public service campaign to try to educate parents about the potential pitfalls inherent in children playing the same sport over time.

The good news is sports medicine has reached such a level of proficiency that even the worst injuries, such as the 15-year-old who underwent Tommy John surgery, don't necessarily mean the end of a career. Dr. Wolin reports that a few years after that young athlete recovered from the procedure, he began a college pitching career.

But there is still the threat of more pain further down the line. "There can be long-term consequences" even after successful surgery, notes Wolin. And athletes who specialize aren't just susceptible to physical consequences.

"I am seeing burnout," the doctor says.