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2-27-2013

Lisa Barkley
University of Central Florida

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STARS Citation

Barkley, Lisa (2013). Young athletes must learn to balance health, challenges. UCF Today, 2013-02-27. Retrieved from <http://today.ucf.edu/young-athletes-must-learn-to-balance-health-challenges/>

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Young Athletes Must Learn to Balance Health, Challenges

By Lisa Barkley
UCF Forum columnist
Wednesday, February 27, 2013

We all want sports heroes and we all want to win – but that desire comes with a price. Just as there will always be winners in sports, there will always be injuries and losers. Often the lines are blurred between what is in the best interest of an athlete's health and well-being and what it takes to win.

These distinctions are particularly difficult when it comes to young athletes. There is a lot riding on being good at sports. With the rising costs of education, the limited job market and the continuing economic downturn, sports is often the only viable option of many young athletes for their future.

There are many other perks, as well. Good athletes are often very popular and get special attention that others do not.

Considering all of these factors, it is not surprising that athletes are willing to sacrifice a lot of their personal well-being to be good and win.

A medical study from the 1990s asked athletes if they could take a pill that would make them great at sports but would kill them in 20 years. More than a third of the athletes surveyed said they would take the pill.

And it is not just the athlete who is tempted to win at all costs. Coaches, parents, schools, and communities are also very invested in winning in sports for the many advantages that will be available to those people as well.

For most athletes, this push to be better is a great motivation and a very productive factor in their lives. But, many athletes struggle to handle the pressures to win at all cost. In just the recent past we have seen larger-than-life sports heroes such as Lance Armstrong and Oscar Pistorius fall from grace.

Having served as a team physician at the Little League, high school and collegiate level since 1996, I have seen several patterns of progress for young athletes who aspire to play at the collegiate level and beyond. I will call these the straight-arrow, boomerang, and shoot-yourself-in-the-foot approaches.

The straight-arrow approach describes the athlete who is able to maintain balance in training, responses to the trappings of athletic success, and in personal relationships. I have seen this approach lead to more success in getting to the next level of sport beyond high school.

A critical success factor for young athletes is building in rest and recovery time to avoid overuse and burnout. Young athletes are not just small adults. Their bodies and brains are growing and changing rapidly. This means that time is needed to adjust and recover. Cross training in several sports can assist with this as well to use muscle groups and stress the body in different ways.

Even when an athlete knows that a particular sport is the one that he/she wants to focus on, it is imperative to build in some rest time. This helps to avoid injury and mental burnout while continuing to build skills.

The boomerang approach is by that athlete who has pushed to the point of overuse injuries and other health-related problems but is able to rehabilitate and return to a more balanced state. After injury, there is a new line on limits. It is a process for athletes to learn when to push, when to back off and how to manage practices and games so that he/she can recover and play as much as safely possible.

The shoot-yourself-in-the-foot approach occurs when the athlete is pushing too hard all of the time. He/she never wants to let injuries quite heal, plays on multiple teams with no breaks, and wants to play through injuries repeatedly. The justification for this is to get that scholarship, spot on the team, etc.

While there sometimes are clearly certain circumstances when you want to push through to play, this should not happen on a routine basis. These athletes tend to get repetitive injuries, and often over time, the sport is not as fun as it used to be. Many times, full potential never develops and burnout is high. There is often less balance in personal relationships as the desire to be that star athlete is such a dominant part of their lives.

Sports are a fun and important aspect of our lives. There are many advantages for young athletes to join in, but a balance needs to be developed to help avoid the downsides of participation and to prepare athletes for playing longer and handling the challenges.