

## Campaign seeks to stem 'epidemic' of young athlete injuries

Amanda Cuda, Staff Writer

Published: 03:52 p.m., Saturday, May 22, 2010

Dr. Robert Stanton remembers when sports injuries among children and adolescents were relatively uncommon.

Stanton, an orthopedic surgeon and sports medicine specialist practicing in Fairfield, said there was a time when he and other doctors would see a few young athletes every year with a sore shoulder, or maybe some other sports-related issue. But today, it's not unusual for kids who haven't even started high school yet to seriously hurt themselves playing sports. "Every one of us (working in this field of medicine) is seeing more and more of this," said Stanton, also the president-elect of the American Orthopaedic Society for Sports Medicine. "It's almost become an epidemic."

According to Safe Kids USA, a nationwide network of organizations working to prevent unintentional childhood injury, more 3.5 million children aged 14 years and younger receive medical treatment for sports injuries each year. Athletics-related injuries among high school students average about 2 million each year, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The numbers are alarming enough that doctors like Stanton felt it was time to intervene. In April, the American Orthopaedic Society for Sports Medicine launched the Sports Trauma and Overuse Prevention campaign. The initiative, also known as STOP Sports Injuries, is a national effort to educate students, coaches, athletes and others about what they can do to prevent injuries. The effort will focus on sports that have the highest rate of injuries. These include baseball, competitive cheerleading, dance, gymnastics, running, softball, soccer and football. However, Stanton pointed out, "almost every sport has an injury rate."

The campaign has a web site, [www.STOPSportsInjuries.org](http://www.STOPSportsInjuries.org), where athletes, doctors, parents and coaches can download information about sports injuries, and tips for preventing these ailments. STOP also has recruited a group of athletes and business leaders, dubbed the STOP Council of Champions, to promote the campaign. The council includes professional golf legend Jack Nicklaus, professional football player Howie Long and Olympic speed skaters Bonnie Blair and Eric Heiden. Locally, Stanton said he hasn't yet reached out to local leaders about the STOP campaign, but plans to enlist local organizations, such as the Bridgeport Bluefish, to aid in the effort.

The goal of STOP, Stanton said, is to lower the number of sports-related injuries, and keep youth athletes on the field and out of the operating room. "What orthopedic surgeons in general do is fix things, like broken bones," he said. "But it's also our responsibility to help prevent injuries."

How much is too much?

There are several reasons why Stanton and other doctors see more children and adolescents suffering from sports injuries. For one thing, an increasing number of kids are playing sports. According to the CDC, high school sports participation alone rose from 4 million athletes during the 1971-1972 school year to 7.2 million athletes in the 2005-2006 school year. Stanton also said he's seeing children starting sports at younger ages. Not only that, but these young people often specialize in a single sport, meaning their bodies are repeating the same sets of motions over

and over. That puts young athletes at risk for injuries due to overuse.

There are two main types of sports injuries: acute and overuse. Acute injuries are usually the result of a single event, and include such common ailments as ankle sprains, hamstring muscle strain and wrist fractures. Overuse injuries, which are the result of repetitive use over time, are more common, accounting for nearly half of all sports injuries to middle and high school students. Injuries from overuse include Achilles tendinitis, shin splints and tennis elbow.

Stanton said it's alarming to see young athletes with such serious, and preventable injuries. Stanton's fellow AOSSM member, William N. Levine, agreed. "When you see eight-year-olds coming into your office with shoulder and knee problems, it should make you cringe," said Levine, director of sports medicine at the Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center in New York.

The risks of overuse haven't gone unnoticed by local sports officials. David Johnson, athletic director at Bunnell High School in Stratford, said as recently as 30 years ago, students who played a specific sport pretty much limited their activity to their school's scheduled season. For instance, baseball prodigies would play during their school's baseball season -- and maybe during the summer -- and that would be it. They'd also likely divide their attention among a variety of sports, which lowered the likelihood of a particularly area of the body being overused.

Now, Johnson said, students are more inclined to focus on just one activity -- and they have the option to participate in their sport of choice year-round. Ideally, this allows a young athlete to become better at his or her sport. But, Johnson said, if you have, for example, a young pitcher honing his or her craft month in and month out with no breaks, "that's a lot of wear and tear on a young arm."

sports fun, and safe

In addition to overuse, causes of sports injury in young people include poor training and conditioning, and insufficient rest after an injury. One thing that's particularly upsetting to Stanton is the fact that many young athletes play while injured. He said a lot of children and adolescents are under such pressure -- either from themselves or from an outside source, like a parent -- to succeed that they ignore pain and other warning signs of injury. But this can only make an injury worse, Stanton said. Kids need to speak up if they're hurt, he said. Likewise, parents shouldn't urge kids to "play through the pain."

In fact, Stanton said, one of the aims of the STOP campaign is to make sure that kids are participating in sports for the right reasons. "Children should enjoy sports," he said. "It shouldn't be something they're forced to do."

STOP doesn't aim to keep kids from participating in sports, Stanton said. On the contrary, he said, sports can be fun and beneficial for children and adolescents, providing them with exercise and socialization. All the campaign does is work to persuade athletes to take better care of themselves, Levine said. "The goal isn't to stop kids from playing," he said. "It's to help kids play in a better environment and safer way."

The campaign does seem to have the potential to help growing athletes said Bob Lehr, a member of the executive staff of the Connecticut Interscholastic Athletic Conference. Like Johnson, Lehr has had concerns about overuse among athletes. He's also grown worried about the trend toward specializing in a single sport, as opposed to playing a variety of sports. Thus, he said, an effort to educate the public about the risks facing young athletes has promise.

"Anything that can be done to further the health of student athletes is something we'd support wholeheartedly,"  
Lehr said.