



## Webster Youth Sports Council Health & Wellness Initiative

# SPORTS ARE BACK!

by Dan McGuffie, PT, DPT, OCS

As athletes, parents, coaches, and communities dive back into youth sports following an unscripted delay due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we excitedly look forward to a fun, safe, and successful season. However, with limited time to train and prepare, shortened preseasons, and condensed regular seasons, it begs the question:

### IS THERE A RISK TO ATHLETES RETURNING TO THE GAME, TOO FAST?

A normal preseason typically offers young athletes the opportunity to gradually ramp up towards competitive intensity. Organized stretches and warm ups, conditioning exercises, and sport-specific drills prepare an athlete's body to compete at game speed and allow for timely, proper recovery. Our bodies do not like surprises – so, with shortened preseason, it is very important that an athlete be in shape and ready to build up quickly.

As health care providers, we see many injuries during fall sports due to young athletes coming off a period of inactive summer months. This closely resembles the recent pandemic-related hiatus. As an athlete, it is important to be physically prepared for your sport. If your sport requires a lot of running and you haven't been running in the last several months, your body is not going to be ready to perform at a high level when you need it to. With this sudden increase of stress on the body, you are setting yourself up for an injury that could shorten your season or prevent you from performing at your best.

**Everyone involved plays a role with keeping athletes safe throughout the condensed season.**

#### The Athlete

Physically preparing for your sport before the season starts is the best way at preventing overuse injuries. Playing catch, going for regular runs, eating healthy diets, and getting the appropriate amount of sleep are a few ways you can safely prepare for an upcoming season. Once you are in season, listening to and responding to your body is vital to remain competitive. Do you have any aches, pains, or muscle tightness that are not going away or are getting worse? Are you taking care of your body and respecting the need to rest and recover? Talk to your coaches and/or parents about any physical ailments you have even if it seems small or unimportant.

#### The Coaches

Getting athletes ready for the games while protecting them from injuries without a typical preseason to evaluate athlete patterns or fitness levels is challenging. This balance in such a short time period is something that we have not had to deal



Started in 1993, the Webster Youth Sports Council is a youth sports advocacy coalition comprised of community sports groups in Webster, NY.

with before and finding that happy medium is important for our athletes to be safe and successful. As the coach, being able to evaluate player performance and knowing when to rest and allow for recovery versus push and progress is difficult. Strictly adhering to sport-specific guidelines such as pitch counts help prevent overuse injuries on bones and muscles that are still developing in young athletes.

So what can you do as a coach? Take note of how your athletes are performing. Ask yourselves: Are pitchers losing accuracy or velocity? Are your mid-fielders not attacking ground balls like they normally do? Is your speedy midfielder being beat to the ball unusually often? Is your defender taking more penalties and getting out of position more than they usually would?

## The Parents

As parents, we get to see our young athletes both inside and outside of their sport. We have a unique insider point of view – into their feelings, emotions and mental state - which can offer valuable insight into how our kids are physically tolerating a return to the game. Not every athlete will be able (or willing) to acknowledge the stress that's being put on his or her body. That is why it's important to evaluate your child through different aspects of their sport *and* life.

How is your child talking about their experience on the field? Is their academic performance in school declining? Are they grumpy or moody more often? Do they look forward to practice and the next game or do they seem less interested in participating? All of these clues can provide insight into how an athlete is physically handling the return.

### Dan McGuffie, PT, DPT, OCS

*Dan is the clinical director of Lattimore Physical Therapy in Webster. Originally from the Finger Lakes, he obtained his Doctorate of Physical Therapy from Ithaca College and completed an Orthopedic Residency program where he earned his Orthopedic Clinical Specialist certification. During his residency, he worked alongside the medical staff for the Dallas Stars of the NHL. He then worked in New Hampshire where he teamed up with the local youth sports association to educate coaches and parents on injury prevention and return-to-sport training. He is excited to be back in upstate New York with his wife, son, and energetic dog – Freddy. He looks forward to being an integral part of the WYSC and the Health and Wellness newsletter!*

## Huddle Up

No matter what role you play, know this: as much as we prepare, injuries do – and will – happen. Seeking appropriate medical evaluation in a timely manner can be key for decreasing recovery length and limit time away from play. Even small aches and pains that seem harmless can progressively worsen and become a larger problem down the road, especially during a condensed season.

What we all want is for our young athletes to have a fun and safe season in their sport of choice. Now, perhaps more than ever, paying attention to subtle signs from each athlete is essential as we seek to prevent serious injury following such an unprecedented, unplanned break from sports.

**Athletes:** be upfront and vocal about how your body is tolerating the quick return to sport. Prepare appropriately for your upcoming season and do not underestimate the importance of rest and recovery.

**Coaches:** look for a decline in performance when your athlete is competing. Follow pre-determined guidelines for youth athletes. Allow for additional rest and recovery as able.

**Parents:** be aware of your child's changing demeanor and desire to play. Respond to any signs or reports of injury. Seek medical attention/evaluation when problems arise.

