

Why Tommy John Is Against the Surgery That Bears His Name

The baseball legend says the procedure is too commonplace among sports-obsessed teens



Pitcher Tommy John shows his surgery scar

Tommy John shows his scar from the surgery that bears his name.
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By: Tommy John | 8 Comments
Published September 05, 2018

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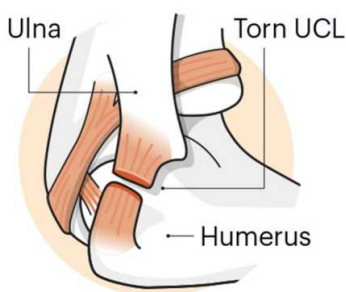
What do you think of when you hear the words “Tommy John”? If you’re a [baseball fan](#) of a certain age, you might think of the four-time All-Star pitcher who won 288 major league games. That lucky fellow is me.

But to most Americans, the words “Tommy John” mean something different: [surgery](#). In particular, the once-revolutionary elbow surgery that saved my career in the mid-1970s, a procedure that’s now so common that even people who’ve never heard of me have heard of the operation that bears my name.

In 1974, when I became the first person to have a damaged ligament in my elbow surgically reconstructed, I was thrilled. It saved my pitching arm halfway through my 26-year baseball career. I had no idea it would be called Tommy John surgery until a decade later, when the surgeon who pioneered the method, Frank Jobe, told me it was easier when describing the technique — ulnar collateral ligament (UCL) reconstruction — to simply say, “You know, that surgery I did on Tommy John.”

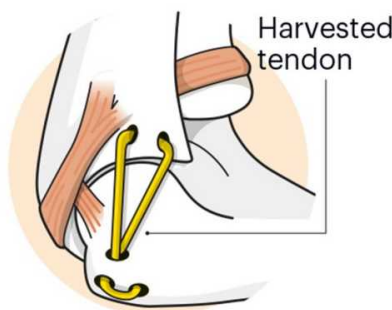
Tommy John Surgery

The Problem The ligament that connects two arm bones at your elbow gets torn, usually from overuse.



It doesn't bother me to watch my legacy being upstaged by an operation that has saved plenty of ballplayers' careers. What does bother me is that my name is now attached to something that affects more children than pro athletes. I was in my 30s and playing major league ball for nearly a dozen years before needing the operation. Today, 57 percent of all Tommy John surgeries are done on kids between 15 and 19 years old. One in 7 of those kids will never fully recover.

The Fix A surgeon removes the torn ligament; drills tunnels in the two bones; threads a tendon taken from the patient's forearm or leg through the tunnels; then secures the ends together.



But this is about more than just baseball and elbows. It's about the way we are raising our children. The nation's youth-sports industry is a \$15 billion business — and more and more, that business pushes children to make decisions early about which sport they want to play, and then to pursue that sport to the exclusion of all others. And kids' bodies are paying the price. The rate of ACL tears in kids has been increasing by 2.3 percent per year for two decades, and about 1 in 5 teens in contact sports have had at least one concussion. And if a child is spending more than eight months annually in one sport, he or she is nearly three times more likely to experience an overuse injury in their hip or knee.

My childhood was the opposite of what's being pushed on many kids today. I never had one professional lesson, and my only coach up until age 16 was my dad. Sure, my friends and I were always active, but we never played the same sport all year and didn't have complicated schedules. I've noticed that most pro athletes had a similar childhood. They all juggled multiple sports, took time off and never overdid it growing up. They were into baseball, football and basketball simply because they loved them. Youth sports were merely a pastime, not a business. And most of all, no one was having unnecessary surgeries.



Tommy John pitching in the 1980s FOCUS ON SPORT/GETTY IMAGES

It's hard seeing so many kids being pushed the way they are today, and getting hurt as a result. As the father of a son who also shares my name — Tommy John III, a chiropractor who works with many injured young athletes — this fight is personal. My hope, whether I'm around to see it or not, is that the next time you hear "Tommy John," you'll remember an athlete and his son who tried to call attention to what may be happening with our grandchildren, instead of a surgery — or any unnecessary injury or procedure, for that matter — that no child should ever suffer in the first place.

*This essay is adapted from Tommy John's forward to *Minimize Injury, Maximize Performance* by Tommy John III.*

<https://www.aarp.org/health/conditions-treatments/info-2018/tommy-john-opposes-namesake-surgery.html>