

There is a disturbing trend in youth sports. More kids are showing up in medical offices with chronic sports-related injuries usually seen in adults. There are Little League pitchers and tennis players with shoulders and elbows damaged by overuse. There are PeeWee football players with anterior cruciate ligament tears. There are youth soccer players with ACLs and aggravated ankle injuries.

Physicians have long assumed that kids did not get ACL tears but the evidence is proving otherwise. Kids can tear an ACL by twisting the knee with the foot planted – basketball, soccer, even cycling. Most likely, we are seeing more of these because our kids focus younger on a single sport and play it more throughout the year. Parents and coaches are reluctant to rest the “good” athlete and kids are encouraged to play with pain.

These types of injuries often require surgical repair and long rehabilitation, a big price for a very young athlete. Most of this damage is preventable by simple common sense and a willingness to remember that youth sports are for growing bodies that need to be protected. In particular, the protection means varying the demands on the body. Players need to take more time away from a sport, play a different sport, cut back on the practice time (or vary the actions during practice), and de-emphasize winning.

The greatest soccer powers are in Europe and South America. Coaches in both of those areas are appalled at the way Americans have structured youth soccer. There are too many tournaments that demand 3-5 games over a 3-day tournament, too many practices without enough variation or resting interval that would allow bodies to rest and protect muscles, ligaments, tendons, and joints. There are too many parents and coaches who increase the pressure to perform, to win, and to “play through the pain” at younger and

younger ages often resulting in injury. There are ways to develop skills and protect those young bodies.

European and South America programs focus on skills and creativity more than winning titles. They depend heavily on exercises and games that teach skills and allow for innovative play. In France, for instance, there are no national championships for teams under the age of 16. Through the age of 16, players are encouraged to develop their foot skills above all. That means dribbling.

In many programs in the USA, coaches begin to push players at the earliest ages to “pass” which does not develop dribbling skills crucial to managing the ball on the field. While passing is important, being able to dribble the ball around and through opposition separates the great from the good. Letting the youngest players dribble, even go the length of the field, develops better ball control and allows for creativity to develop. Passing to teammates becomes a natural extension of this process. Coaches can utilize games and exercises that promote more dribbling.

The temptation to ask more and more of good players is great. It is important that coaches and parents have a conversation about protecting the developing player from that temptation and sometimes from himself. We would all like to see soccer as a lifelong sport.