



Sports Injury Recovery

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“You Can’t Make Me!” – Five One-Liners to Say to an Athlete in Pain

When he was little and got hurt, you could make him sit out the game. Now he's bigger than you are and it's pretty unlikely you can make him do anything. So persuasion is the name of the game when it comes to talking to your adolescent or college-aged athlete about site-specific, sport-related pain.

Often, when your young athlete says, “I can still play,” he really *can* still play. It’s not that he can’t... it’s that perhaps he *shouldn’t*. But the fact is, he’s young and he’s inexperienced. He doesn’t know enough about his body to *really* know whether to play or not. And it’s your job to educate him!

If you’re like most parents, you probably don’t know much about pain. So we’ve come up with five one-liners to help you explain the basics. These one-liners will give you enough ammunition to get your child’s attention and to explain the consequences of continuing to play while in pain.

REASON #1: The Weakest Link is Where the Chain Breaks

Your athlete is dealing with constant physical pressures – whether from the coach, his team or himself. While his youth and vitality may make him less vulnerable to injury, the strains of play can lead to weakness. A weakness may manifest itself as a site-specific soreness or pain that doesn’t incapacitate him. In other words, he *is* still able to play. But it’s important to understand the risk of stressing that weak spot.

Just like a chain under tension – where the weakest link is the one that breaks – injuries commonly occur at an area of weakness in the body. It may be obvious – perhaps the injury is a re-injury – and he

knows it’s on its way back. On the other hand, it may not be obvious. He may never have experienced pain in that location before. But that fact doesn’t mean something isn’t on the fringe of a break or injury.

One thing to keep in mind is that the weakest link isn’t necessarily “weak”...it just isn’t as strong as the muscle next to it. And that is all it takes.

For example, if your athlete runs or bikes a lot, he may have very strong quadriceps. But his hamstrings may be weaker in comparison. So if he elongates his hamstring beyond maximum length during a sprint, he ends up with a pulled hamstring. His quads could take the strain...but his hamstrings could not.

Maybe his hamstrings are in great condition, but he suddenly moves side to side and taxes his groin muscles beyond their ability. That may be all it takes to pull his groin.

A soreness or pain may be an early indication of a weak link. Taxing that muscle with further stress can be like tension in a chain...and that link could be the one that breaks.

REASON #2: If You Drive on a Flat Tire, You Damage the Rim

Let’s look at what happens if he doesn’t take the time and effort to restore his condition.

Here’s a simple way to look at it. Have you ever had a car with a flat tire? If so, you know not to drive on it for any length of time. Why? Because if you drive on a flat, you’ll first ruin the tire, then damage the rim, alter the alignment and the bearings, and sooner or later even the interior of the car will develop a



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permanent rattle. In short, it won't take too many miles before the flat tire has seriously altered the functionality of the car.

A relatively small problem (like a minor pain) turns into a big problem (like a pulled groin) when you push the muscle too far or for too long.

The good news is that, unlike cars, the body has the ability to heal. The bad news is, unlike cars, you can't go out and buy a new body. In the end, it pays to take care of the one you have. When your athlete understands the long-term potential injury that might come from playing before his body is ready, he might be more willing to let his body recover fully.

REASON #3: Your Body is Trying to Tell YOU Something

Each athlete experiences pain at a unique intensity...and with a different level of tolerance. Some athletes grit it out, playing through the pain. Others are more inclined to seek immediate relief. The important thing to teach your athlete is that PAIN is his body trying to give him information. The strength of the signal should be a good indicator of how important it is to immediately alter his plans and pay attention to the message. Pain should not be ignored. It is the body telling the brain it needs the time and resources necessary to recover.

If your athlete chooses to ignore that signal and keep playing, he should understand that less pain means quicker recovery...that if he stops *now*, he might actually be back in the game sooner than if he decides to play and makes the injury worse. A more serious injury will keep him out of the game even longer.

REASON #4: If You Want to Play Next Year...Don't Play Now

Young athletes feel indestructible. As a result,

they're often too willing to give in to the temptation to play through the pain. They tell themselves, "It'll go away!" And their rationalizing makes them quick to trade off their future in order to play NOW.

But don't trade today for tomorrow. It's just a game...though no athlete wants to hear that. It will be over in a matter of minutes or hours. But how long will the pain last?

The fact is, there are lots of games, but he's got just ONE BODY to play them with. If he decides to play through the pain, it could result in a chronic injury that comes back to haunt him for many games to come.

REASON #5: A Healthy Athlete is a Happy Athlete

When you're injured, when you're totally out of the game, it's not just about the pain anymore. It turns into an emotional handicap as well. The athlete who has to sit out game after game...or who just decides to quit going since, "I can't play anyway!"...is *not* a happy player. When he gets injured, it affects his social life too. He misses out on the rush and satisfaction of playing, winning and just being a part of the team.

And the longer that goes on...the more he'll wish he'd decided to go through the proper recovery method from the start.

Emphasize the emotional and social impact an injury could have on his involvement in sports. When he is able to see the bigger picture, he'll be more inclined to consider the full impact a serious injury could have on his enjoyment of the sport beyond just playing the big game itself.

Understanding Leads to Better Decision Making

While you can't duct tape your athlete to the bench



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and make him sit the game out, you can educate him so that when he makes his choice – to play or not to play – he's at least making an informed decision.

Because the facts are these...if he decides to push through the pain until he gets an injury, it will be an even larger sacrifice than sitting out a game. He may be out for awhile. At this point, he'll have no choice—he's OUT. Others will take his place. He'll still have to go through the steps to recovery...there will just be a LOT more of them.

Recovery involves reducing swelling, improving circulation, and removing toxins. Your athlete will need to restrengthen the area and regain flexibility in the muscle tissue before resuming full speed activity.

So if he wants to play past this season...if he wants to play *next year*...he's got to take care of himself RIGHT NOW. If he chooses not to, your best one-liner may be:

"Good thing you don't plan on being an athlete for long."

Because if he doesn't take himself out of the game to take care of his body...his body will make that decision for him instead.



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