

Too Much Exercise?

Top Teen Athletes Train Too Hard and Risk Long-Term Injury

— Jan Weidermayer

Koivu, Komisarek and Latendresse are all out with injuries this week. This is bad news for the Montreal Canadiens, but fairly normal for a professional sports team. Professional athletes are paid to perform their best night after night and are used to accepting injuries as part of the risk of their job. This is not the case, however, for young athletes who are still in high school.

"We are seeing arthritis, tendonitis and fractures that we normally see in people over sixty," Dave Yelanis, a sports therapist, told reporters this week. "Young athletes are pushing themselves too hard to succeed and they are doing serious damage to their body."

Kara West plays on the Canadian Women's Under-Twenty Basketball Team; that is, she did, until a knee injury caused her to watch from the bench for the past ten games. "It's frustrating. I was just doing the exercises and training that any top-level athlete does, and then this happens. I don't know when I will get back in to play."

Mara Khan, the athletic director of Concordia University, explained, "Knee injuries in young athletes are becoming very common. We used to see this kind of damage only in old people who had just worn out their knees, but now people in their teens are doing twenty, thirty years-worth of wear and tear in just a few short years. They focus on one sport and train all year for it instead of giving their body a rest between seasons."

Khan recommends giving your body a break, or at least switching sports regularly to give your body a more even workout. "Just like mechanics recommend that you rotate your tires, you should rotate the parts of your body that you use by cross-training: one day bicycle, the next day jog, the next day swim, and so on."

Most young athletes don't understand the long-term benefits of cross-training.

"I am focused on having surgery, then getting back in the game," West responded when asked about her plans "In the meantime, I'll study videos of my play and do some cardio exercises to keep in shape. I'll deal with bad knees when I'm older and not playing basketball."

That time may come sooner than expected for West and other young athletes like her.