

Seeking New Ways to Shoulder the Load

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SPORTS MEDICINE

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A little prevention goes long way in staving off throwing injuries

By JENNY DIAL

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Brandi Virgil had one of those "if I only knew then what I know now moments." not too long ago. A few months after undergoing surgery for a shoulder injury, Virgil realized she was one of thousands of young softball players who has been throwing incorrectly for years.

"I would have fixed my throw long ago if I could have avoided surgery," said Virgil, a junior at Cypress Creek High School.

Virgil suffered from a common softball/baseball injury ¶ a SLAP tear, which stands for superior labrum from anterior to posterior.

The SLAP tear occurs at the point where the tendon of the biceps attaches inserts onto the labrum, a cuff or cartilage that forms a cup in which the upper arm bone moves. The shoulder socket is too shallow and unstable to allow such movement.

Several types of labral tears are common in athletes who use a lot of overhand motion, such as baseball and softball players, volleyball hitters, tennis players and swimmers.

But a torn labrum is unlike other tears. The injury is rarely sudden. It happens over time, most commonly with repetitive overhand motion.

Last year, the American Association of Pediatrics reported more than 162,000 throwing injuries for children 5 to 15 years old. The injuries increased with age, with 12- to 15-year-olds having the most problems.

In recent years, several doctors and trainers have tried to lower that number with preventive measures. In Houston, Dr. Charles Metzger is spreading the word about the SafeThrow Program. He has teamed with BreakAway Speed, a training facility that evaluates the throwing motion of middle and high school athletes to correct problems.

Stretching neglected

"What a lot of people don't realize is that one of the biggest reasons for these shoulder injuries is that kids are throwing incorrectly at a young age and continuing to do that,' Metzger said. "They are also neglecting some stretches that can really help.'

Clements softball coach David McCorkle said about 75 percent of incoming freshmen in his program need their throwing motion adjusted. He spends the first two weeks of the offseason teaching every player proper throwing mechanics, stretching and exercise.

"I have been really fortunate in this program to not see too many shoulder injuries,' McCorkle said. "But we work a lot to prevent those before the season gets started. I wish everyone would.'

Pearland coach Laneigh Clark said it's almost too late to help freshmen who have an incorrect throwing motion.

"The muscle memory is so strong at that point,' she said. "Only the players with real determination and desire are going to go out there and make the necessary changes.'

Clark said she wishes youth softball and baseball coaches would start instilling proper throwing mechanics and stretching at an early age.

"Some of them do, but a lot are unaware of the right techniques,' she said. Virgil played baseball or softball beginning at age 5 and wishes she had learned properly from day one. She is upset about the nine months of softball she missed with her SLAP tear. The injury, though, has made her an advocate of better throwing methods and stretching.

"My teammates probably get annoyed with me because I make everyone stretch longer than they want to,' she said. "But the injury took me out of the game and caused me a lot of pain. I don't want to see it happen.'

But Virgil can name 15 players who have suffered some sort of labral tear. "It's much more common than a lot of people think,' she said. "I just wish it was more common to know how to throw and stretch and try to save your shoulder.'

Another problem is detection. Athletes tend not to catch it immediately because shoulders are often sore after practices or games. For Virgil, it took months to realize something was wrong.

Two summers ago, she was throwing home from center field. By the next summer, when she could barely throw to first from shortstop, she knew something was wrong.

But it was almost a year before she had surgery.

The key to detection is in the joints. If the pain or soreness is in the shoulder and not the muscles, it might be something more, Metzger said.

"Athletes will play through soreness and that is OK,' he said. "But it's important to know when soreness might be something else, because if you keep playing on a shoulder injury, it gets worse and worse.'

Rafael Gross knows what that's like. A trainer at BreakAway Speed, he spent several years pitching in the Los Angeles Dodgers and Chicago Cubs organizations. He suffered a shoulder injury during the 2004 season and didn't undergo surgery until 2006. He said his outlook on taking care of his shoulder has changed.

"I have learned a lot of exercises and stretches to do that will save me from hurting my shoulder more,' he said. "It's really important to me to teach those lessons to young pitchers so they won't have to go through the same thing.'

Change not that difficult

Gross works with Alex Metzger, 13, the son of Dr. Metzger. Alex is looking forward to years of pitching.

"When Alex came in, he wasn't throwing the ball correctly,' Gross said. "Within an hour of practicing the right way, he was throwing the ball correctly. It's that easy to make that change and, hopefully, save your shoulder.'

To throw correctly, a player must keep the elbow higher than the shoulder for most of a throw. Also, the arm should be at a 90 degree angle.

Dr. Metzger, who has seen thousands of shoulder injuries, wants parents and coaches to emphasize correct throwing techniques. That's why he is involved with SafeThrow.

Metzger and the trainers at BreakAway Speed will visit any team to evaluate players' throwing techniques and show proper throwing execution, all free of charge. More details on the program can be found at safethrow.com.

"Nothing is 100 percent, but the 900 or so kids we have worked with are all still injury-free,' Metzger said. "Sports are a great thing for young people, and it's horrible to see so many get injured when there are ways to prevent that.'

Clark and her staff organize a clinic for coaches every fall.

"I think anyone who has the knowledge of these injuries and how you can try to avoid them needs to get the information out,' Virgil said. "I am back in the game now, but I missed some crucial time because of my shoulder.

"It was a battle, and I wish I would have known better.'

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