Playing through the pain

After two concussions, senior Stephen Enke thought playing football would be too risky. “Be safe when you’re playing,” Enke advised.


Ouch.

High school athletes deal with injuries on a daily basis such as shin splints, sprained ankles, or pulls. It’s a normal, natural thing. In most cases, when an athlete experiences muscle pain it means he/she is getting stronger. But how can an inexperienced, young teenager tell if the pain is normal or something far more serious?

The US Centers for Disease Control (CDC) estimates of the approximately thirty million who participate in youth sports, two million will suffer an injury.

The rate of injuries among high school athletes is on a “continued rise” according to David Swenson, an MD/MPH candidate at the Ohio State Colleges of Medicine and Public Health.

Jay Carlson, an athletic trainer for Millard West High School, believes most injuries occur when athletes play multiple sports in the same season “so they don’t have enough time to rest and recover.”

“In some instances it’s lack of conditioning, but most of the time it’s overuse,” Carlson added.

Some athletes do play through injuries, but most commonly players will rest and do physical therapy. At Millard West, there are still many athletes who suffer chronic pain each day.
Reserve girls’ basketball player Allie Kallman has been consistently dealing with bilateral spondylolysis. Kallman describes this as a “stress fracture on both sides of her spine, located in her lower lumbar vertebrae.”

This specific injury unfortunately is becoming more and more common among high school athletes due to hyperextensive movements in sports caused by stress fractures.

Kallman believes her injury was most likely caused by improper weight lifting or the fact she has not had an off-season since about fourth grade. Although she is back on the court and playing the game she loves, throughout the summer she wore a back brace to try to heal the fractures.

“Before both practices and games, I do heat and stretching. I also have to go to the trainer and get STEM. It relaxes my muscles around the injury and makes it feel better,” Kallman explained. She expects it to hurt, but stops when the pain becomes unbearable. Her injury will never fully heal even though she underwent intensive physical therapy last September.

There is a big difference between soreness, a minor injury that can be ignored, and a severe injury that needs a doctor diagnosis. Kallman said one way to deal with injuries is to stop “playing when you know it hurts.”

Freshman Isabelle Wostoupal, a teammate of Kallman, also battles a long-term injury. Wostoupal’s injury is located in both of her shoulders. Her ligaments have stretched out over time, causing her shoulders to separate from the muscle sockets. Simple things like doing a push-up can still cause her shoulders to dislocate. This type of shoulder calamity occurs most commonly in sports that cause extreme stress.

Wostoupal could not have anticipated her injury, but she tries to prevent it from affecting her skills on the court. Throughout the summer she went to physical therapy and continues to do stretches and strengthening.

Although she has been back and playing for almost six months, like Kallman, she must deal with the pain.

Wostoupal and Kallman play with a constant pressing question in the back of their minds: when is enough...enough?

“Almost like when you feel the need to cry,” Wostoupal said. If she doesn’t listen to her pain level, and her ligaments tear again, she will need surgery.

Stephen Enke made a bold decision to opt out of football his senior year due to the risk of suffering a possible third concussion. After his last two concussions, both occurring during football, he had trouble concentrating in school.

“I really didn’t like not having control,” Enke said. Although upset he would not be on the field this year, he was content with his decision.
Kip Colony, the girls’ varsity basketball coach at Millard West, is watching and educating his players.

“If you stretch properly, I don’t believe you completely eliminate the risk, but you certainly can decrease your risk for aches and pains and the pulls and tears.”

Coach Colony believes “the aggressiveness that is presented in each individual sport” determines how serious the injury could become. He said the importance of sports increases more and more every year, such as competing for scholarships and spots in professional leagues. The harder a person has to work for something, the more aggressive they will play, thus, more injuries.

Even so, Colony said there are more precautions in place compared to years past. Colony added he “tends to hold athletes out of practice or competition a bit longer until specific tests and guidelines have been administered.”

Athletic trainer James Johnston has seen “bigger, stronger, and faster” competitors which increases the severity of the injuries.

Jamie Matson, the school nurse at Millard West, deals with athletic injuries throughout the day. "For long-term injuries they typically consult with the trainer, but if they need to rest, ice, or elevate due to pain throughout the day, they come to the nurse's office,” Matson explained.

“We have also seen a number of chronic injuries related to weight lifting that used to just be seen in collegiate sports,” Johnston added.

Carlson deals with everything from small aches and pains to muscles tears and severe concussions like Enke’s.
“Probably the most common injury I see is ankle sprains, knee sprains, and shin splints,” Carlson explained.

Depending on how the problem area moves and how swollen it is, Carlson can tell if the injury is something that can be played through or needs to be rested. This is the typical criteria to determine the difference between a playable injury and something far more serious.

Carlson said the keys to preventing injury is proper training, bracing or taping the injury, and use of proper equipment. Those tips plus Colony’s words about stretching and eating right are good for the overall health of an athlete.

“Be safe when you’re playing,” Enke said. “Don’t decide to do anything that would change you for the rest of your life.”

- February 28th, 2013
- Meghan Kocovsky
- Millard West