

# Sports Injuries



## Technology, Time and Therapy Get You Back in the Game

If you've ever been slowed by an injury, you know some conditions garner a bit more sympathy than others. Explain to a friend or colleague that your sling, brace or crutches are the result of a sports injury, and you might earn a measure of respect. After all, you were out there putting your body to the test.

That's about the only silver lining when your favorite sport sends you to the sidelines. And it's not just professional athletes who suffer debilitating injuries. Anyone can make a costly cut on a gym floor or twist into trouble on the golf course.

"Mostly we see the weekend warrior types," said Meryl Freeman, a physical therapist who manages outpatient rehab for Rex Healthcare. "It's people who are playing softball or golf after not doing it for a while. Most of what we see with back and neck injuries is years of bad posture, bad body mechanics, weak trunk muscles. You have to have pretty good strength to do most sports."

Some injuries are relatively easy to correct. A few weeks of physical therapy can help a patient regain flexibility and range of motion. Duke Sports Medicine Center offers a comprehensive sports medicine clinic and physical therapy

program for the diagnosis, evaluation and treatment of sports-related injuries for all athletes—from recreational to professional. Half of the staff and clinicians who care for patients at the center are board-certified in sports medicine or orthopedics, while others are certified athletic trainers.

"Having all care providers, from surgeons to physical therapists available at one location makes communication a lot easier for everyone involved, especially the patient," said Tracey Koepke, senior public information officer for Duke University Health System. "All forms of rehabilitation—from the patients' first

*"We wouldn't have won five championships last year without Duke Sports Medicine. They keep our players on the field and in competition. They're part of our team."*

**Sean Thomas**

Head Athletic Trainer  
North Carolina Central University



For twenty years, Duke Sports Medicine has proudly served the student-athletes of North Carolina Central University—including its 2006 CIAA championship football team. From mending injuries to cheering the athletes on at tournaments, we're there to keep them at their best and on their game. And we can do the same for you. Whenever you need us for knee, shoulder, or other athletic injuries, give us a call—we'll see you within 24 hours.

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### Torn Rotator Cuff

But even a well-conditioned athlete is vulnerable to injuries, often far more serious than sprains and strains.

One of the most common athletic injuries is a torn rotator cuff, which refers to the group of muscles and tendons that wrap around the shoulder. It's typically associated with the overuse pattern of baseball pitchers, who make the repeated motion of the overhead throw. If you've ever seen a photo of a pitcher in the middle of his windup, you have surely noticed the distorted angle of the throwing arm. Just as it appears, that position is not a natural one for the body, and is a snapshot of a good news, bad news scenario.

"If you start early enough, you actually make some pretty significant adaptations to a young athlete's shoulder,"

said Dr. Alex Creighton, M.D., an orthopedic surgeon at UNC Health Care. "It can give the athlete the ability to generate more power, but it comes at the expense of something else. Then they lose internal rotation of their shoulder. After years of doing that, you're eventually going to get into a problem with your rotator cuff or with the labrum, which is the lining around your shoulder socket."

Fortunately, doctors have a better handle on rotator cuff tears and shoulder dislocations than they did 20 years ago. Because most of the injuries require only arthroscopic surgery, doctors are more inclined to pursue an aggressive treatment on a first-time dislocation.

"Through two or three small incisions, we can repair the torn tissue—the part that keeps you from dislocating again—in a one-hour operation," said Dr. Mark Wood, M.D., an orthopedic surgeon at Wake Orthopedics. "It's an outpatient surgery and there's minimal pain. And the rehab after surgery is identical to the rehab without surgery. So the advantages are

potentially huge."

Arthroscopic surgery also helps decrease the risk of repeating the injury. "There's a 50- to 90-percent chance they were going to dislocate again and again," Dr. Wood said. "In the old days, we waited until they were debilitated by it and did a very large surgery. With arthroscopic surgery, we can repair the torn tissue and put it back the way it was before it was torn, and we decrease the dislocation rate to 5 to 10 percent."

### Anterior Cruciate Ligament (ACL) Tear

Similar logic prevails with another common sports injury—the ACL tear. This injury is often caused by sharp cuts made in basketball and football, when there is severe rotational force during the pivot. Twenty years ago, ACL surgery required a large incision, and the results were not very favorable. It often spelled the end of a high-level athlete's career. But in the last 10 years, all that has changed. "The ACL is something we understand a whole lot better," Dr. Wood said. "The



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incisions are small, fixation methods are stronger and outcomes have improved."

One ACL mystery remains: the alarming rate at which women sustain the injury. Female athletes seem far more prone to ACL tears. "It's almost an epidemic," Dr. Creighton said. "It's anywhere from five to nine times more common for female athletes from age 12 to 20. The way a woman lands puts her more at risk, like after they jump for a head ball in soccer or go up for a rebound. (Due to) some of the things they respond to in space, they are more prone to have their ACL rupture."

Dr. Wood said muscular anatomy has a lot to do with it. "The way their muscles fire and the anatomy of the knee has been shown to be different from men," he said. "We think that may predispose some of them to increased likelihood of injury, but those things are somewhat hard to prove. There's a sharp increase in the number of women's ACL injuries in the last 10 years, mainly because there are a lot more women participating in high-level athletics."

### Time to Heal

Surgical advancements come with a warning. Operational techniques might make you new and improved—or at least full-functioning—but time is still a critical factor in making a proper recovery.

Dr. William Isbell, M.D., who specializes in sports medicine and shoulder surgery at Raleigh Orthopedic Clinic and is the head orthopedist for the Carolina Hurricanes, cautions that there is no way to shorten the body's natural timetable.

"Despite our best efforts, there is a definite time frame that some injuries take to heal," he said. "Minimally invasive arthroscopic techniques, as well as more intense rehabilitation programs, have allowed athletes to return to their sports earlier and earlier. Letting athletes return before that time subjects them to further injury and more down time. There is definitely a fine line between returning to play quickly and returning to play too soon."

Medical and training staffs oversee the return of professional athletes to their lineup, but casual athletes must monitor

their own recovery. That means following the guidelines given to them by medical professionals.

"I tell patients all the time that their surgery is only a small part of their recovery from injury," Dr. Isbell said. "Their rehabilitation is one of the major keys to a successful recovery. Despite the time-intensive nature of rehab, it is worth the effort to maximize and speed recovery."

And if you find yourself in a physical therapist's office, don't hesitate to ask for help with your game plan. "Physical therapists educate," Freeman said. "For example, for back pain patients, we will educate them on proper lifting techniques and proper ways to do their daily activities to help them avoid injury. But you also have to know the limitations of your body and listen to what your body tells you." WL

*Kurt Dusterberg is a freelance writer who lives in Apex. His book, "Journeymen: 24 Bittersweet Tales of Short Major-League Sports Careers," was published in July.*