

Parents: Don't let kids pitch too much
Sunday, August 31, 2008
By Michael Cunningham, Sun Sentinel

Parents who plan to send their little ace pitcher to the mound this fall after a busy summer of youth baseball should reconsider.

That's the warning from medical experts who blame a sharp increase in elbow surgeries for youth pitchers on overuse. They caution parents against letting their child throw too many pitches during the season and allowing them to pitch more than eight months in a calendar year.

The issue caught the attention of doctors and researchers at the Andrews Sports Medicine and Orthopaedic Center in Birmingham, Ala. The prominent surgeon James Andrews noticed an increase in the number of Tommy John surgeries performed on pitchers younger than 18 in the mid-1990s.

The surgery, named after the first major league pitcher to make a successful comeback after undergoing the procedure, involves the replacement of a ligament in the elbow. The American Sports Medicine Institute, the research and education arm of the Andrews Center, found that before 1997, only 12 of 97 of its Tommy John patients were 18 or younger; by 2005, it was 62 of 188 (33 percent).

ASMI considered several factors for the trend, including the type of pitches thrown, pitching mechanics and the size of the player.

"The amount of pitches was by far the dominant factor in who got hurt pitching," said Glenn Fleisig, research chair for ASMI.

Fleisig said a 2006 study of pitchers in Birmingham found that those who pitched more than eight months per year were "five times as likely to be in the surgery group than the healthy group."

The ASMI data led USA Baseball, the sport's national governing body at the amateur level, to recommend pitch count and rest guidelines for youth pitchers. The limits depend on the age of the pitchers and do not prevent them from playing other positions with the exception of catcher. Researchers found that pitching and catching in a game puts too much stress on young arms.

Little League adopted the pitch count and rest regulations in 2007 after a limited trial in 2006. Steven Tellefsen, president and CEO of Babe Ruth

League Inc., said his organization is reviewing the data on pitch counts -- currently it limits the number of innings each week and also has minimum rest requirements.

It's on parents

Still, parents can get around those guidelines by letting their kid play in overlapping leagues, including the many all-star teams and travel leagues that attract the best players.

"That is what aggravates me more than anything," said Randy Johnson, president of Coconut Creek Little League. "Why would you ever want to do that to your child?"

Johnson and others in youth baseball say parents are motivated by the lure of college scholarships, pro contracts or the chance for their kid to play for top private high school programs. Or it could just be a symptom of the natural inclination for parents to brag on their kids.

"A lot of times -- and I probably shouldn't say this -- it's the parents' egos," Tellefsen said.

For coaches, the limits can make it tough to find enough effective pitchers. Chris Downs, spokesman for Little League, said that challenge and "tradition" were the two concerns most often expressed by leagues skeptical of the new pitch count rules.

The pitch count and rest limits can be undermined by parents who don't let coaches know their kid is pitching in more than one league.

"The possibility of excessive pitching can happen for good pitchers that are in demand for [multiple] teams," Coral Ridge Little League board member Pete Nicoletti wrote in an e-mail. "My 11-year-old son, Grayson, has had this issue occur and he would not say anything to his [coaches] so it's up to responsible parents to pull the coach aside and clue him in to pitches thrown."

Experts say failing to do so may jeopardize the child's health. Dr. E. Lyle Cain, fellowship director for ASMI, said repetitive arm injuries are cumulative and may not show up until a few years later. Youths who suffer such injuries are at risk for permanent damage to their cartilage growth plates and developing arthritis as young adults.

Develop skills

Cain said big league scouts tell him that overuse of youth pitchers has contributed to the scarcity of young pitching prospects.

"They don't want someone who has thrown all year round since they were 8," Cain said.

Marlins pitching coach Mark Wiley said parents should encourage kids to play multiple sports so they can rest their arms and also develop athletic skills that help in baseball.

"If you are good, you are good, and they will find you." Wiley said. "You think there is any scout that goes, 'Well, I don't want to draft that guy because he wasn't in a travel league when he was 12 years old?'"

Taking a few months off from baseball didn't hurt Marlins left-hander Andrew Miller's career. He said he didn't focus exclusively on baseball until high school, playing football and basketball before that, and wasn't a full-time pitcher until his sophomore or junior year.

He was named the state Player of the Year in 2003 at Buchholz High School in Gainesville and was drafted in 2006 by Detroit after three years of college. Miller was the first player from the 2006 draft to make it to the majors, debuting that season, and said time off from baseball as a kid "definitely helped" his path to the majors.

"I think I would have gotten worn out if I played every month of every year," said Miller, currently recovering from patellar tendinitis.

Mechanics key

Cain said Tommy John surgery is often seen as a "badge of courage" among players because they believe it means the pitcher is throwing hard.

Cain said the procedure's success rate has led many pitchers to underestimate the severity of the surgery. A recent study he co-authored found that 83 percent of Tommy John patients returned to same or better level of play.

Some pitchers report throwing harder when they return from the surgery. But Fleisig, the ASMI research chair, said that could be because their arms weren't

100 percent before the surgery, they benefited from the forced rest period following surgery or they worked out harder than ever while rehabilitating.

While the surgeries have been more successful, it's equally important to assess the problem, says Stephen Swirsky, pediatric sports medicine specialist at Miami Children's Hospital. He sees eight to 10 new patients a week, ages 7 and up, who have elbow pain.

"There's also bad mechanics," he said. Before suggesting surgery, he encourages patients to rest, rehab and return with a coach evaluating their pitching technique.

"It doesn't help to do a surgery if they're going to turn right around and injure it again," he said.

Fleisig credits Little League for "being at the forefront" of rules designed to protect pitchers but said there is only so much that can be accomplished with new regulations. In the end, it's up to parents to make sure their kids don't pitch too often.

"All you can do is discuss it, talk about it openly, and hope it trickles down to coaches," said Johnson, of Coconut Creek Little League. "Hopefully it is in the parents' mind, where they think, 'Maybe I need to look at that.' Because there is so much documentation on arm injuries and surgeries for kids under 18, it's ridiculous."

First published on August 31, 2008 at 12:00 am