

Cross-Training May Prompt More Injuries

Reprint from the Penn State News

Cross-training, in which gymnasts run or play another sport, could be counterproductive or even dangerous for the athlete.

The July issue of the *Penn State Sports Medicine Newsletter* notes that cross training has its advantages. It breaks the monotony of only one physical discipline, sometimes serves as physical rehabilitation for the injured athlete and allows athletes an alternative activity for staying fit when they are not able to train in their primary sport. However, there is reason to question the value and even the safety of cross training.

Edward G. McFarland, M.D., an orthopedic surgeon at John Hopkins University, and Mike Wasik, A.T.C., a trainer at the University of Florida, studied the frequency of training and cross training injuries sustained by 68 women collegiate swimmers over a seven-year period.

They discovered that 45 percent of the injuries were due to swimming and 44 percent to cross training, the rest of the injuries resulting from everyday activities. The McFarland-Wasik study was the first to show that cross training injuries can present difficulties for competitive swimmers. It also suggested that athletes who train in activities other than their primary sports are more susceptible to injuries than those who do not.

"Serious athletes think that cross training will give them an extra edge over competitors," McFarland told the newsletter. "They go out and try to run further or faster than others as part of a training program, but end up getting injured. Those injuries frequently prevent elite athletes from performing in their primary sports."

The weekend or recreational athlete can also have problems with cross training because their bones, muscles, tendons and ligaments are not used to the type of stress put on the body by a second or third form of exercise.

McFarland advises the recreation athlete, "Whatever you think you can do in the first day of a new sport, cut it in half. Too much stress, too fast, results in injuries. Exercisers need to be very careful about new activities or sports that they have not played for a long time."

"An athlete in one sport is not going to get better as a result of playing another one," notes William T. Bates, M.S., R.P.T., former head trainer with the New England Patriots. "There are coaches without a sports science background who choose inappropriate cross training methods and often put their athlete at risk of injury. I'm not saying a baseball player shouldn't run to improve aerobic fitness, but that player would be better off working on upper body strength training and actually swinging the bat to get stronger or quicker."

Professional football teams probably do the best job of designing sports-specific exercises, Bates told the newsletter. Linemen work on quick burst strength and power training, while receivers are doing 20-30 second sprints. Coaches in other sports should follow football's model in planning their training programs.

Daniel Monthley, MS., A.T.S., assistant athletic trainer at Penn State, says, "We see a good

number of injuries that are not related to primary sports. The most common occur among football players who sprain their ankles or twist their knees playing pickup or intramural basketball.

"At Penn State, we have to look at recreational sports as a form of off-season conditioning because athletes are going to find something to play," Monthley says. "On the other hand, coaches and trainers talk with their athletes about their responsibilities to avoid injuries. Some coaches are becoming strict on this issue. They can't afford to lose an athlete because of an unnecessary injury, regardless of how it happened."

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