



Coaches – Helping your athlete through an injury

What is injury?

An injury is any physical or mental disruption that gets in the way of doing something you were once able to do. Sometimes a mental block can disrupt your ability to perform, just like a physical injury would. Not all injuries are the same. Your fundamental understanding is important when it comes to injury. Your experience, your attitude, your own history of injuries is going to be different from athletes you might be coaching, so keep an open mind and understanding of your athlete's injury.

Subjective and objective injuries

Not all injuries are created equal. The same type of injury may be experienced differently by different athletes.

One reason for this is the differing aspects of injury.

- **Objective aspects** of an injury is what you see on the body or in an MRI/ x-ray, or the diagnosis given by a medical professional.
- **Subjective aspects** of an injury include the pain or discomfort the athlete feels, as well as their perception of how "serious" the injury is.

Objectively you may have a shoulder injury but subjectively you may feel fine, and vice versa.

Old school response to injury – Rub some dirt in it and let's go.

New school – Listen to your body, which is a temple you will need your entire life.

An athlete who has had multiple injuries may have a different attitude about injury than an athlete injured for the first time. As a coach, keep an open mind and understanding of the differences.



The 5 Stages of injury

1. **Pre-injury:** Conditions before the injury occurs, i.e. poor hydration, high stress, lack of sleep.
2. **Immediate:** Seconds to hours after the injury.
3. **Post Immediate:** After injury, before recovery. Athletes may experience grief, anger, sadness or depression.
4. **Recovery:** Taking care of yourself. Treat recovery with the same level of care and attention as performance. Be sure to communicate with parents regarding your expectations and needs during this stage.
5. **Returning to Play:** Objectively ready may differ from subjectively ready. Check on the athlete's emotions about returning to play frequently and allow the athlete to express any doubts or concerns if they arise.



How does an injury affect mental health?

How can coaches help prevent injury



Coaches should consider the demands and stressors you place on an athlete pre-season vs. in-season. Are your athletes:

- Over trained
- Close to burnout – pushing athletes too hard for beginning of season when that conditioning is for mid-season
- Building in recovery time – proper hydration, sleep and less stress on body
- What safety protocols are available? Athletic training staff, team physician or ambulance available nearby
- Think through the structure of practice
- Balance out intensive trainings with lower intensity trainings

A coach's support after an injury

Immediacy of injury – How are you actually responding to an athlete who is injured or showing signs of injury? The number one priority is to make sure the athlete is safe in that moment and protected from additional injury. Next, offer support. Not the time to say "Get back in game." Offer unwavering support because the injury could be one game, a season or career. Support your athlete in the moment.

Post Immediate – This is not a time to get retrospective – if you would only have done x, y or z, you wouldn't have gotten injured. Instead, this is about supporting the athlete, monitoring how they are doing and checking on them on the sidelines and later that night at home. You may also check with health professionals.

Recovery – When an athlete is injured, you want to avoid the athlete feeling like nobody cares about them on the team. It is important for a coach to check with medical professionals, see how their athlete is doing and find a reasonable, objective timeline – again difference between objective and subjective. Also, make sure you are including the athlete in practice; come up with a role for the athlete to stay active and involved. Reach out to the athlete, be encouraging and have teammates reach out.



Return to play – Follow medical professionals' advice on when an athlete can return to play. Base your expectations on objective medical advice not desire for wins. As a coach, be respectful if an athlete is physically ready to return but not mentally. Vice versa, an athlete may be mentally ready to play but not physically ready. As a coach, you need to be objective, listen to the medical experts and set appropriate expectations as it relates to returning to play.