



Ways for Youth Athletes to Stay Active and Safely Prepare for the Return of Organized Sports

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Working out and staying in shape from home presents a new challenge for all of us during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is especially true for many youth athletes given that team seasons have come to a halt, and local gyms and school weight rooms are likely closed. Nonetheless, many youth athletes have a desire to continue to be active and prepare for the possibility of a return to competitive sports activities when it is safe to participate.

Sports medicine physicians have raised the concern that a return to sports too quickly, without the proper lead-in time for appropriate conditioning and endurance training could lead to a higher rate of injuries¹. When compared to pre-COVID times, most youth athletes and students are presently leading a more sedentary lifestyle, albeit by design to help prevent COVID spread. This relative inactivity, combined with the current discussion of an accelerated opening of youth sports, is placing athletes at the potential for a higher injury risk.

The benefits of exercise and staying active are well known, but the risks of “ramping up too quickly” can lead to overuse injuries, muscle strains, and major injuries including ACL tears and Tommy John elbow injuries that ultimately cause an inability to or a delay in one’s return to play. In order to minimize this risk, we have provided the following recommendations to allow youth athletes to stay active within their own home and maintain a level of fitness that can carry over to a hopefully near future return to sports.

1. Make a schedule

Plot out on a calendar your daily and weekly goals. Think about building up to a level of goal endurance, not accomplishing it all in one week. Give yourself time for rest and recovery following a strenuous workout and provide your body with adequate nutrition and sleep. The basic habits of success remain true even though the world around us is ever changing.

2. Balance your activities

Try to diversify your workout routines by incorporate walking, running and biking around your neighborhood. Consider an in-home online yoga or pilates program. Many professional athletes have seen the benefits a routine like this can provide, and the interest should trickle down to the youth athlete level².

For example, if you are a pitcher seeking to remain at a high level of throwing, your workouts during this time should not be solely focused-on pitching. In fact, most of your training should be directed towards reinforcing the basic mechanics of throwing and addressing any kinetic chain deficits. Improving your core strength, lower extremity balance, flexibility and cardiovascular endurance are just a few examples to enhance your pitching capability.



This applies to all repetitive activities at high risk for overuse injuries. It is a great time to incorporate injury prevention programs like FIFA 11+ and follow guidelines from organizations like USA Baseball and their Pitch Smart program.

3. *Be creative with home workouts.*

With a little creativity, you can use commonly found items around the home to be effective substitutes in the absence of traditional gym equipment. A can of soup can be used for 1-3 pound weights. A backpack or purse with a couple books can be used for larger weights. Consider using a large couch cushion to perform lower extremity balance, proprioception, and strengthening exercises in lieu of a bosu balance ball or foam mat.

Body weight exercises such as burpes, mountain climbers and jumping lunges are effective low impact exercises. These three simple movements can improve cardio, strength, and balance while working out with limited space.

4. *For the technology driven.*

Consider using online and smartphone apps to improve your workouts, make them more enjoyable and coach you to success. Some examples include: GoNoodle, Peloton, DribbleUp, Fitivity, SNYPR, Nike Training Club, Just Dance, Sworkit Kids and many more.

Acting now to build endurance, flexibility, and strength can help prevent new acute and overuse injuries once youth athletes are able to return to competitive sports. When the time does come for a return to youth sports- parents, coaches, and athletes should approach it with the big-picture in mind. Making up for lost time and returning full throttle should be replaced with the goal of a gradual and planned increase to game level performance. Most importantly athletes should achieve this while enjoying the ability to play the sport, socialize with peers and stay healthy.

1. <https://www.espn.com/soccer/german-bundesliga/story/4095678/bundesligas-return-from-coronavirus-lockdown-no-fansplenty-of-injuries-and-awkward-social-distancing>. Accessed June 2, 2020.
2. <https://apnews.com/5794ea91fae14ac1ac67e5826452b7f4/Tackle-this:-NFL-players-benefit-from-regular-yoga-practice>. Accessed June 2, 2020.