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Helping to Keep Our Girls Injury Free

Knee injuries, particularly non-contact injuries to the anterior cruciate ligament (ACL), are increasing at an alarming rate among young women soccer players. According to recent estimates of NCAA women soccer players, more than 1 athlete in 10 suffers a serious knee injury. Of high school athletes, the injury rate is more than 1/100, which represents more than 20,000 injuries each year. **The injury rates in female athletes are estimated to be four to six times greater than that of their male counterparts.** The July 29, 2002 issue of Soccer America reports that “nearly one quarter of the players in the WUSA have torn ACL’s at some point in their playing careers.”

Why is this happening to our girls? The answers commonly given are: “girls are built differently,” or “they’re not as strong” or “it’s just the less skilled girls who are getting hurt.” But the truth is: they’re faster, stronger and more competitive than ever before. In spite of this, knee injuries are reaching epidemic proportions. Even the best international players are blowing out their knees. Yes, their anatomy and physiology is different: we can’t change that. But researchers are keying into an even simpler explanation: **girls move differently from boys.** They tend to be more upright, straight-legged and quadriceps-dominant when they run, turn and land. Not coincidentally, most of the ACL tears are happening when girls decelerate to cut, change direction or land a jump. No contact is involved.

What can we do? By re-training the way female athletes move, programs like mine which are on-going in Ohio and California have already shown significant reductions in girls’ knee injuries. They have introduced **specialized training to develop balanced leg strength, insure moderate flexibility, and increase agility and body control.** Not only has this protected knees, but it has also enhanced quickness, strength and jumping ability. But this training must be prescribed with proper attention to individual differences in body build, movement, strength, and balance. This will vary with the age and developmental level of the athletes. Perfect form is a must: increases in intensity, repetitions and challenge can follow.

Is this one more thing coaches have to fit into limited practice time? NO, it should not be added to an already full training schedule. Overtraining of athletes is rampant! **This training can take the place of warm up** (perhaps the 10-15 minutes coaches are already dedicating to warming up by jogging a mile around the field) or can be incorporated into drills which are already an integral part of practice. And, it requires little or no new equipment.

I will be offering **10 sessions free of charge for CYA soccer players and their coaches** early this Spring season. Here are the components which will be the focus:

1. **dynamic movements** - designed to increase body temperature, lubricate joints and move body parts through the whole range of motion demanded by the sport (jogging is not enough)
2. **sport-specific focused stretching** – making sure the muscles are supple and ready to respond; proper alignment and positioning must be emphasized
3. **plyometrics** – controlled jump training done with emphasis on proper form and attention to body position; this increases coordination, decreases landing forces, and increases strength and power
4. **agility training** – trains quickness and safe change of direction while emphasizing body control with proper knee position; designed to give players the ability to avoid high risk injury positions and situations

Help me reach all of our girls with this message: **We CAN help protect your knees and keep you playing your best for years to come.** This training, done with focus, consistency and dedication, will pay huge dividends in injury prevention, performance and long term health.

I will be offering demonstrations, sample analysis, and a video presentation at the coaches meeting on March 24th to give you a better idea of what this training looks like. If one of your players/daughters would like to participate in the demonstration, please let me know right away. (10 years or older is best) I can be reached at wlebolt@cox.net; (703) 264-1671 to volunteer as a demonstrator or with any other questions.

Yours in Good Health and Good Soccer,
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