Overtraining Young Athletes
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I have long supported the notion that the zeal many Trainers and Coaches show with respect to conducting high intensity training sessions with young athletes is akin to the unsure actor who feels a need to ‘over-do’ his or her role in a given appearance for fear that the audience may disapprove of his acting ability.

Almost like a ‘they paid for it and now I must deliver it’ mind set.

As a Coach, you sometimes feel as though you must have your athletes walk away from a training session dripping with sweat and barely able to open their car doors. After all, if they don’t feel as though you are ‘training them hard enough’, they may opt to go and seek the services of a different Coach.

The problem is that overtraining syndromes are not hard to develop with adolescent athletes and must be recognized as an issue with respect to programming.

For ease of explanation sake, let’s just say that if your athlete walks into your training center at what would constitute a normal biological level, and if your training stimulus was at an intensity that would enable the athlete to dip below this normal biological level, but not be too much so as to not be able to ascend into a level of super compensation, then, well... that would be good.

But there are energy’s in the world that effect an athletes recoverability from a training session (you know... recovery... that’s the part of the training routine during which your athlete’s body actually makes improvements and gains).

For example:

• Nutrition
• Emotional Stress
• Sleep

Let’s examine those individually for a second.

Nutrition

I communicate with my athletes daily as to what they should be eating and when. The problem is that they are teenagers who don’t always listen to everything as much as they should! Also, they are not solely responsible for this particular issue in their lives.

Mom or Dad have a strong say in what the food selections are in a given week (’cause they are the ones who typically pay for the groceries). More over, my teenage athletes don’t often cook dinner for themselves and very often have to deal with hectic class schedules and sometimes teachers who restrict snacks in class, both of which serve to make eating meals at regular intervals difficult.

I am not embarrassed to say that even though I have very open lines of commu-
nication regarding nutrition and other issues, I too have athletes walk into my facility who haven’t eaten anything for 5 hours. Maybe this is not the time for a ‘ass-kicker’ of a work out??!

**Emotional Stress**

I have brought this point up far too many times and had adults tell me something to the effect of ‘kids don’t have stress. .. wait until they’re out in the real world’. That is sheer garbage. First off, think back to when you were in high school.

Assuming you took your academic life seriously, how stressful did you find tests, exams, term papers?? I know I felt a great deal of stress in my adolescent years due to school pressure (you wouldn’t know that to look at my high school report card, but I digress...).

Add to that dealing with boyfriends and girlfriends... you know the one... she was the one you were going to marry, remember? Dare I say, the adolescent years are chalked full of emotional tugs-of-war that are exasperated by two relatively forgotten points -

A. Kids are kids. They don’t have a ton of life experience so the stress they are facing is the severest that they know. You can look at your life and think high school was a breeze compared to what you’re going through now, but teenagers don’t have this reflective capability... their frame of reference is restricted to their experiences.

B. Teenagers, in most cases, have not yet developed certain life coping skills that see them through particular issues. As an adult, I can talk with my young athletes about their problems and offer solutions that they couldn’t see because my coping skills are more advanced than theirs. Need-less-to-say, emotional stress is a very real concern in the life of a teenager and can dramatically effect their ability to recover post workout.

**Sleep**

The two best examples I can give with respect to sleep (or more appropriately, sleep deprivation), happened with a few of my athletes over the past couple of weeks.

A. Over the Winter Holiday recently, I noticed many of my teenage athletes coming into my facility for a 2:00pm workout looking absolutely exhausted. Upon probing them for information as to why, their response was that they had just woken up. Because of the Holidays, they were staying up until 4:00am and not waking until 1:00pm. Forecast three weeks later, now these very same athletes are still looking exhausted because once school started again, they couldn’t seem to re-regulate their bodies to going to bed at a reasonable time and waking up at 6:00am.

B. Connect that example to the fact that Finals have just concluded in the school district nearest my training facility. Like many students, many of my athletes spend hours studying - very often at the expense of sleep.

The reality is that I counsel my athletes daily as to nutritional habits, sleeping patterns and stress reduction, but they are still teenagers and in many cases are going to do what they want. The one leverage I have however, is their training routine. I control the strings on intensity!!

This is an important issue to reflect on however. How many young athletes in our culture are over stressed, over tired and nutritionally deficient?

Now, how many Trainers and Coaches could care less and still program nothing but intense-filled training sessions.