

Is Golf Becoming a Pain???

By Scott Laurent

Oh agony, I thought to myself while watching a friend hobble up to the tee box. I said “why don’t you let that knee heal a little bit more before you take a chance and really set yourself back from that MCL tear you had just a few short months ago. He said, you know there are a lot more ways to hurt yourself on the golf course than I ever expected, but this one I did while snowboarding and I can’t afford to miss out on another month of golf. All right I said but you will get no sympathy from me if you start hitting your par shots.

It dawned on me, how many people including myself that would play through a round with lower back, neck and or elbow pain, just to name a few ailments, completely ignoring the fact that what were digging ourselves in deeper by continuing to aggravate the problem with exactly what hurt it in the first place. Research has shown that approximately 50% of pro’s and amateurs suffer from persistent ailments associated with playing golf that prevent them from playing for over a month every year. Most injuries affect the wrist, elbow, shoulders and lower back region.

There are several differences in the prevalence of these injuries between pros and amateurs. For example, pros tend to suffer from wrist and hand injuries due to overuse after playing for several hours each day most days of the week for close to 9 months a year. Amateurs on the other hand derive most of their injuries in the elbow and lower back, which can be blamed mostly on a lack of proper swing mechanics and an overall deconditioned (not physically prepared).

Since we will do all we can to continue playing the sport we love so much, let’s take a look at some of the injury prone areas and discover some of the reasons and possible antidotes for prevention.

The Back-

Substantial forces are transmitted by and through the back, specifically the Dorso Lumbar Region or better known as the lower back. Amateurs and pros alike suffer from ailments to the lower back. Rotational forces and compression of the spine during the swing is inevitable, even for the pros with perfect swing mechanics. To put it simply, the most perfectly executed swing is still not great for your back. Golfers are susceptible to muscular strains of the back and herniated disks to the spine.

The primary muscles used during the golf swing including the erector Spinea, the abdominals, (especially the transverse abdominals), along with the internal and external oblique, which all work in such a balanced complex set of movements to stabilize the spine and help balance our bodies through the dramatic coiling and uncoiling of the golf

swing. Any weaknesses or imbalances due to poor muscle strength or inflexibility is a recipe for a back problem.

Tips for Keeping the Back Healthy -

- *Proper warm ups should include several minutes of dynamic stretching (movement based) which focuses on carrying the spine through a similar range of motion as performed during the golf swing.
- *Strengthening the core, which includes all the muscles from the pelvic region up towards the top of the sternum. This should be done in an effective strength training and balance training program focusing on preseason, in season and post season conditioning.
- *Practice good posture at all times, this strengthens the transverse abdominals and the erector spinae.
- *If playing with back pain, use a modified swing limiting the degree of rotation on both the backswing and follow through.
- *Use a roll cart instead of carrying your clubs when walking the course.

Shoulders-

The shoulders are the fourth most frequently injured areas in golfers. The shoulder is a complex set of muscles, ligaments and bones that provide tremendous freedom of movement for the shallow joint socket. The major muscles include the infamous rotator cuff, which consists of the infraspinatus, supraspinatus, subscapularis, and the teres minor. The three primary bones consist of the clavicle, scapula, and humerus.

This area is very susceptible to injuries including bursitis and tendonitis as well as micro tears, which can cause scar tissue and bone spurs to impinge the range of motion of the shoulder. Continued play with a weak or damaged rotator cuff could possibly lead to shoulder separation or dislocation, further compounding the problem and possibly escalating the condition to a surgery only remedy. Physical therapists know well the desire of the amateurs to mimic the large degree of shoulder rotation the pros exhibit during that powerful stroke.

Tips for Keeping Shoulders Healthy-

- *Work on your swing mechanics while paying particular attention to the proper angle of the shoulder on the top of the backswing and the follow through.
- * Develop a seasonal workout schedule using resistance training to strengthen the rotator cuff muscle group.
- * Dynamic stretching and warm up of the shoulders should be performed before playing a round.
- * Don't play with an impingement or pain in the shoulder; this is a warning sign that something is not right. After resting the area appropriately (several days or more if needed), if the pain is still noticeable while slowly practicing a swing, then it might be time to have a doctor take a look at it.

Elbows and wrists-

Medial epicondylitis or better known as the “golfers elbow” afflicts amateurs more than 3 times as much as professionals. There is a large amount of strain on the muscle and tendons leading to the elbow from the wrist and forearm during the take away and at impact. This can be further complicated by golfers with an overtight grip, short and quick backswing, and or weak forearms. Amateurs tend to injure the elbow more so due to a higher incidence of mis hits including heavy divots.

Wrists are the major sites for the absorption of forces produced during the downswing and at impact. This is the number one site of injury for pro golfers. During the swing, the wrists often reach or exceed their normal range of motion. Common strains and tendonitis are complaints most often; however single action trauma due to mis hits can be potentially disastrous and include serious bone or ligament damage including fractures to the hand.

Helpful tips for Elbows and Wrists-

- *Strengthening of the forearms through resistance training protects the tendon connected to the elbow from overstretching and tearing during impact.
- *Reduce tension in the arms during the swing, concentrating on lessening an overtight grip on the clubs, especially the irons.
- *Practice stretching and muscle strengthening of the wrist and hand flexors and extensors.
- *Careful when using mats at the driving range which can be especially unforgiving with a miss hit.
- *Rest appropriately the affected area if at all experiencing recurring pain in the wrist or elbow while playing.

To play or not to play is a question we are all faced with every season when experiencing the pains of golfing. If in doubt it is always wise to air on the side of caution and prevention rather than having to nurse a season ending injury because of our desire to push through the pain. It's not like we aren't seeing the pros do it, but unless you have a personal physician and physical therapist waiting for you in the clubhouse, it is probably better swallow your pride, rest and wait to fight another day!

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