



# Kids and triathlon

## Taking care of our next generation

By Dr. Jordan D. Metzl, MD

**A**t this time of year, many of us are dedicated to improving our swimming, biking and running and are committed to a lifestyle of health and fitness. But in this month's column I would like to invite you to step outside of your own training for a moment to think about our next generation of triathletes.

A mother came into my Greenwich, Conn., office one Tuesday evening with her 10-year-old daughter. The mom is an established triathlete patient of mine whom I had treated for several minor injuries. This visit, however, concerned her daughter, who had shin pain.

"Dr. Metzl, Elizabeth here is a budding triathlete," she told me. "She loves the sport and is having trouble doing it because her shins hurt."

The medical issues here were pretty straightforward. Elizabeth had medial tibial stress syndrome (see my Dr.'s Orders column on shin splints in the November 2005 *Triathlete*). The causes of this condition in her case included significant foot pronation, a calcium-deficient diet and a bit too much stress on her developing bones. Fixing her was easy, with properly fitted running shoes, a calcium- and vitamin D-rich diet and an appropriate training volume. She was better within a couple of months and has been fine since.

The past 30 years have witnessed dramatic changes in youth sports. There are now more than 30 million boys and girls under the age of 18 playing sports in the United States. While these numbers are cause for celebration, they come at a price. The increased numbers of young athletes have created a culture of greater intensity and competition. Whereas kids used to play one sport for each season, the year-round single-sport athlete, specializing early, is quickly becoming the norm.

Doing too much too young carries a high risk of injuries—both minor ones, such as Elizabeth's, and major ones such as the career-ending breakdowns I have treated in young gymnasts and baseball players who have not yet reached their teens. With the increased competition in youth sports today, it's important that we remain vigilant about managing



these risks by picking up on the early-warning signs (Elizabeth's mom did a great job here) and understanding that each child athlete, like each adult athlete, is unique. Consequently there is no one-size-fits-all approach.

As the sport of triathlon grows in popularity, we are facing these issues as well. Across the country, kids' triathlons, designed specifically for ages eight to 15, are popping up with greater frequency. In general, kids' triathlons are simply terrific events. They encourage kids to get up, get out and go. Indeed, one of the often-overlooked benefits of being a triathlete is it encourages our kids to follow suit and develop healthy habits that will last a lifetime.

However, we have to be careful. Kids are best served by doing many things. Yes, there are some who can benefit from sport specialization at a young age (e.g. Tiger Woods), but the healthiest approach for most kids is to encourage participation in many different activities, including both team sports and individual pursuits: some with a focus on hand-eye coordination, such as tennis and baseball, and some with a fitness bent, such as triathlon and running. Sport specialization should be avoided at least until the teen years.

So as we encourage kids to participate, let's make sure they do not participate to the exclusion of all else. They will have ample time to become tri-geeks, if they so choose, as adults.

In the meantime, let's encourage perspective. As we grow from a sideline sport to a national craze, we need to try not to fall victim to the trend of premature sport specialization. With kids, and with adults, a diverse physical portfolio is the way to go. ▲

*Jordan D. Metzl, MD, is a nationally recognized sports-medicine specialist at Hospital for Special Surgery in New York City. In addition to his medical practice, Dr. Metzl is a 25-time marathon runner and four-time Ironman finisher. If you are interested in youth sports, check out Dr. Metzl's book, *The Young Athlete: A Sports Doctor's Complete Guide for Parents* (Little Brown, 2004).*