

Parentally Speaking - November 2007

If a young athlete breaks his arm playing one sport and has to wear a cast, but the cast won't hinder him from playing another sport that is getting underway, do you think it's okay for the athlete to participate in that sport if he wants to?

This question is one that is more suited for a medical professional than for me. Although I've been around numerous athletic-related injuries and even experienced a few myself, I am not qualified – even if I had more information about the situation – to make a determination about whether a young athlete has recovered enough to participate in the other sport.

My first take on the situation is that the doctor placed a cast on the arm and told the athlete that he or she probably needs to let the arm heal for a certain number of weeks for a reason. That information, coming from a trained medical expert, should be respected. If that cast has not been removed, it's a pretty good indicator to me that there is some risk involved in any activity that might include physical contact. Even when the cast comes off, a period of rehabilitation to build strength in the injured arm is going to be necessary to help the athlete return it to full functionality as well as to prevent further injury.

Sometimes I think as parents we are overzealous in our desire to see our injured children return to action. There is a fear that he or she might fall behind the other kids and lose playing time, which ultimately might hinder his or her long-term development. Kids are resilient. They bounce back quickly and learn even more quickly. Almost every athlete faces situations where he or she is slowed by an injury and has to take time off. Sometimes it is necessary to take a step back in order to return to full strength and get back on the field with a low risk of re-aggravating the injury and the best chance of continuing to improve athletically.

If it truly is the athlete who is driven by this desire to practice with the cast on (and not the parent), I would recommend that he or she visit the orthopedist who initially handled the injury to discuss the situation. I'm sure, at the very least, there may be footwork drills or some other activities that the athlete can participate in that will keep the skills sharp

and not risk injury. There also may be cardiovascular training that will allow him or her to literally hit the ground running when he or she returns to full action. Who knows, maybe the athlete will be allowed to play, but please when you make the visit prepare him or her – and yourself – for the distinct possibility that he or she won't be cleared for full participation. The doctor trained for years to make these types of decisions and only has your child's best interest and physical well-being in mind. Your child is not a professional athlete and has many years left to grow as a player and enjoy full participation in the sport. There's no reason to risk that for a few extra weeks of practice time now.

By Cal and Bill Ripken