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Youth athletes playing with pain

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The Record

STAFF WRITER

A slip on the balance beam in January caused the ligaments in 14-year-old Christina Masciale's ankle to tear. But the 10 fractures that came before that unlucky misstep were what really persuaded the Woodcliff Lake gymnast to stop training for five hours a day, five days a week.

Soccer player Ricky Romeo suffered a severe concussion in his high school junior year. His twin brother, Vinnie, lost playing time to elbow surgery and a knee injury. The Paramus brothers had years of back pain and too many ankle sprains to count. By the time they graduated in June, they needed a break. "I'd rather take a year off and play soccer at full strength than struggle through another season of injuries," Vinnie said, explaining their decision to turn down a chance to play in college.

Injuries are a risk in any sport. A misstep, a fall, a collision, an errant throw, an

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unexpected bounce, all of these things and more can and regularly do occur. But the injuries that have most bedeviled Christina and the Romeo brothers usually weren't the ones caused by such mishaps. Instead, doctors believed the injuries occurred because their young bodies had been overtaxed.

The stress fractures in Christina's toes, heels, femur, ankle, knee and wrists were labeled overuse injuries," said her mother, Mary Masciale. "There was no other possible reason for them," she said.

Overuse was an aggravating factor in the back pain the Romeo twins suffered as well, and increasingly it's the explanation that Dr. Thomas Bottiglieri finds himself offering to the young athletes who come into his sports medicine practice based in Englewood and Nanuet, N.Y.

"A young body needs rest, and too many youth athletes aren't getting enough of it," Bottiglieri said.

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Bodies need down time

Bottiglieri doesn't just mean a good night's sleep, although that too is often lacking in the schedules of many youth athletes who participate in highly competitive, year-round sports programs. He means rest for the bones, muscles and joints that suffer the most abuse in the body of an athlete who plays the same sport with intense frequency. A pitcher's arm, a tennis player's shoulder, a basketball player's knees — these are all the body parts that show signs of wear by the end of a season, Bottiglieri says. If the season never ends, that wear can soon become a tear.

"A professional athlete has an off season, but too many kids playing sports these days do not," Bottiglieri said. "They are playing year-round and they are not giving their muscles time to rest and recover."

There's a campaign afoot to curb what's considered an epidemic of youth sports injuries, particularly the type blamed on overuse, such as ligament tears, sprains or stress fractures in the shoulders, legs, knees or back. But the doctors, athletic trainers and physical therapists sounding the alarm often call for a remedy that passionate young athletes like Christine Masciale resist.

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Christina started tumbling classes at age 4 and has been a gymnastics competitor since she was 6. After suffering several injury-plagued years, Christina reluctantly decided last fall to drop out of the national USA Gymnastics program, although she had reached the prestigious Level 9. She switched to a program that only holds statewide contests, which meant she could also cut back to 16 hours a week of training this summer instead of nearly 28.

While her doctor — Bottiglieri — thinks youth athletes need to build more rest-and-recover time into their schedules, Christina said taking time off from training isn't realistic in her sport. "The only way I would take time off would be if I were hurt," she said. By hurt, she means really hurt. Christina has competed through pain before and at the moment still wears wrist guards, ankle braces and a knee brace to protect against re-injuries. "If you really love it, you want to keep doing it and you fight your way through it," she said. "You don't want to take time off."

Her mother is hopeful the reduced training

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and competing schedule will help, but she worries about more injuries. "I do only because I don't know what kind of damage this is going to do to her in five or 10 years," Mary Masciale said. Like many parents of determined athletes, however, Masciale said she doesn't want to force her daughter to quit outright because, "It's what she's put her heart and soul into. She loves it."

The Masciales found a compromise, but more and more talented youth athletes are steered toward programs that leave them with all-or-nothing participation options, and what little attention is given to preventing overuse injuries is inadequate, Bottiglieri said.

Baseball programs, for example, think they have addressed the rash of shoulder and arm injuries suffered by players by limiting pitch counts, but that same player might leave the mound and play shortstop or catcher, using the same throwing muscles, he points out.

Rushing back to play

When youth players do suffer injuries, many take the wrong approach to rehabilitation because they are sent a message by coaches and sometimes parents that getting back on the playing field quickly is the ultimate goal.

"What happens is that kids try to make up for

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lost time after an injury and then they push themselves too hard," said Michael Prybicien, athletic trainer at Passaic High School and president of the Athletic Trainers Society of New Jersey, among the many organizations participating in STOP (Sports Trauma and Overuse Prevention). "They need to learn to listen to their bodies and not play through the pain."

Christina Mullins, another of Bottiglieri's patients, said she wishes she had learned that lesson before a chronic elbow condition forced her out of the game of softball three years ago. The 18-year-old from New City, N. Y., played catcher pretty much year-round from sixth grade to her sophomore year, and often kept mum when her arm was sore. "I wish I would have known that this would happen," said Mullins, who had to undergo platelet replacement therapy to lessen the pain she still sometimes feels. "I tell my younger sister all the time, if her arm hurts, she should rest."

Al Romeo, father to the soccer-playing twins, said he regrets that his sons have to take a

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year off from the sport they also love but is relieved they have decided to take the long-term view.

"I don't want to see them as 40-year-olds having trouble walking because their ankle hurts or their knee hurts."

As a physical education teacher at middle school in Ramsey, Al Romeo is increasingly dismayed at the number of youth athletes who bring him a doctor's note saying they are too injured to participate in gym class.

"It seems like every kid these days has a back problem or a knee problem," Romeo said.

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