Staying Healthy as a Senior Athlete

By AJ Cianflocco, MD

This summer, seniors from around the country will descend on Cleveland for the National Senior Games. At venues throughout the city, athletes age 50 and older will compete in 19 events, from archery and shuffleboard to tennis and volleyball. This major sporting event began in 1987 and has grown to 14,000 senior athletes. (See our feature in this issue about a local senior athlete who is participating in the Games.)

The number of seniors participating in competitive sports — both individual and team sports — has been increasing in recent years. As we age, it takes greater effort to keep up one's athletic performance, particularly after age 60. The growing Senior Games shows that many are continuing to be athletic throughout their lives.

The good news is that staying physically active as we age can prevent and even reverse many of the physiological changes that happen. For athletes and active seniors, the keys are having days of rest to recover and modifying our activities. It is also important to avoid total inactivity for any length of time as this can lead to a loss of flexibility, strength and bone mass as well as cardiac deconditioning.

As we age, it’s a matter of understanding our body’s cues and following some preventive measures. For seniors, the basics of injury prevention include:

• Proper warm-up with adequate cooldown after every activity

• Avoidance of abrupt changes in frequency, duration and intensity of activity

• Allowance for adequate recovery time by alternating days of intense activity with less strenuous days

• Attention to environmental conditions such as temperature and humidity

• Maintaining proper nutrition and hydration to promote good health and optimal athletic performance

What to watch for

Aging affects multiple organ systems, from the heart and lungs to our bones and metabolism. Of all the changes, musculoskeletal changes often have the most impact on the aging senior's sport. These changes include an overall decrease in muscle and bone mass, stiffening of muscles, and weakening of ligaments and cartilage.

Risk factors for injury include previous joint injuries, underlying osteoarthritis, and vision and/or hearing impairment. Overuse injuries in seniors are also more common due to the requirement for longer recovery time.

Degenerative meniscal tears and osteoarthritis of the knee are commonly seen together. This type of meniscal tear can occur with minimal trauma in the arthritic knee, just as a prior injury may lead to the future development of arthritis.

Continued on back cover ...
Local Athlete Lanny Solomon to Do Triathlon at National Senior Games

“Have fun! There’s no need to exercise too hard. Just go out and get active and have a good time.”

On any given day of the week, you’ll find Lanny Solomon waking up at 5 a.m. to bike, swim or go for a run. Fitness is “a way of life” for the retired attorney from Pepper Pike, Ohio, who enjoys being active outdoors year-round since he and his wife began wintering in Florida six years ago.

This summer, Mr. Solomon, 62, will join 14,000 senior athletes from around the country to compete in the National Senior Games, which happen to be taking place in his hometown of Cleveland, Ohio. He’ll be participating in the triathlon, which entails a 400-meter swim followed by a 12-mile bike ride and a 3.1-mile run.

“I’ll be competing alongside my athletic friends from Cleveland and Florida,” says Mr. Solomon, who completed an Ironman Triathlon 10 years ago just to say he had done it. “Over the years our social network has become all of the people we do sports with,” says Mr. Solomon, whose wife teaches tai chi and stays active by biking and walking.

Mr. Solomon has been active his whole life but became a dedicated athlete after his father suffered his first heart attack at age 53. “That really shined a light on how important it is to be active,” he says. “You really have to make time to be fit, and sometimes you have to sacrifice things — like sleeping in — to get out and get your body moving.”

Today, he’s involved in several Cleveland-area fitness groups, including the Shaker Cycle Club and the Cleveland State University Masters Swimming group. He feels the rewards are great.

“A good gait can make all the difference for a runner.”

By Amanda Gordon, MPT

Mr. Solomon’s Tips for Senior Athletes

On balance — He says, “Recovery days are as important as workout days. You need time to rest and recover, especially as you get older.” He notes that he never has two hard workout days in a row.

After a race — He says you really need a couple of weeks of downtime after a competition to let your body repair itself.

If you’re new to sports — You have to build up your strength and endurance gradually, he says. “Be smart.”

Staying hydrated — It’s important to drink plenty of water.

Above all — “Have fun!” he says. “There’s no need to exercise too hard. Just go out and get active and have a good time.”

Marathon runners can drop their time by two minutes and everyday runners can avoid injury just by improving their efficiency. If you are a runner, you can do this simply by having a gait analysis performed.

The definition of gait is “the manner or style of walking/running,” and people have many different patterns. Gait analysis is an assessment of your body mechanics, and it can help you make changes that can do the following:

• Improve your running efficiency
• Prevent injury
• Determine the cause of an injury

Both injured and uninjured athletes can benefit from gait analysis by a physical therapist. If you are injured from running, you could benefit from learning about your running style and foot strike and finding out if your shoe wear or a muscle imbalance are contributors to the injury.

As noted, a proper gait analysis may help prevent an injury when you run, and it can make you more efficient. It’s all about proper mechanics. For example, excessive foot pronation, short or long strides, or excessive arm movements can cause increased energy expenditure and decreased efficiency.

A physical therapist can assess the following during an analysis:

• Running history
• Training goals
• Foot placement
• Shoe wear
• Strength and flexibility
• Heel strike
• Arm swing
• Hip, knee and foot mechanics

After a full assessment, you will learn strength and flexibility exercises, personal body mechanics issues, and ways to change or improve your gait pattern to be more efficient and potentially prevent injury.

Cleveland Clinic’s Run Smart Program offers gait analysis. Physical therapists and exercise physiologists assess multiple aspects of a runner’s gait through both direct observation and by analyzing video.

Amanda Gordon, MPT, is a senior physical therapist who specializes in gait analysis. For more information or to make an appointment, please call 877.440.TEAM.
Planning Those Pregame Meals

By Katherine Patton, MEd, RD, CSSD, LD

What to eat before a game! When to eat before a game? For athletes, pregame meals are an important part of their performance, so while it may be tempting to have a quick and easy meal before an activity, there are some things to keep in mind.

When to eat

It takes time for the body to properly digest food, so try to eat your pregame meal three to four hours before a practice, game or performance. A small, carbohydrate-rich snack just one hour before exercise is also a good idea to provide your body with an additional source of fuel.

The pregame meal

Carbohydrates are an athlete’s primary fuel source, so you want your meal to consist primarily of carbohydrates. Sources include:

- Starches and grains — Good options are bread, cereal, crackers, rice, potatoes and pasta.
- Fruit — Fresh is best, but frozen, canned or dry is OK too.
- Milk/yogurt — Fat-free or low-fat milk and yogurt are best.

Your body breaks down carbohydrates into sugar, which your body uses as an immediate energy source or stores in your muscles (for energy during exercise) or in your liver. Be sure to choose familiar carbohydrate sources that you know your body tolerates.

And to maintain hydration, drink plenty of water. This is the ideal way to avoid dehydration when playing sports.

Katherine Patton, MEd, RD, CSSD, LD, is a Certified Specialist in Sports Dietetics for Cleveland Clinic Sports Health. To schedule an appointment, call 877.440.TEAM.

Going the Distance with Energy Gels

Athletes are starting to use energy gels, but are they good for you? Find out in this Q&A with Cleveland Clinic dietitian Katherine Patton, MEd, RD, CSSD, LD, and Nutrition Therapy intern and endurance runner Cortney Staruch.

What are energy gels?

Energy gels are carbohydrate gels that provide energy for exercise and promote recovery. They are made from a blend of sugars, most often maltodextrin and fructose. They offer high levels of glucose to provide fuel for endurance athletes. Most energy gels come in 1- to 1.5-ounce packets, which makes them convenient to take along on a long-distance event. Most energy gels have no fat, fiber or protein, so they can be digested quickly.

What are the pros and cons of energy gels?

Runners, swimmers, cyclists or anyone exercising for more than 60 minutes should fuel their body. Research shows consuming carbohydrates during exercise that lasts longer than an hour improves metabolic response and athletic performance. With energy gels, athletes get a convenient source of energy without consuming a lot of fluid or a heavy meal during a long-distance event.

However, because energy gels contain a concentrated amount of sugar, taking them too quickly could cause an upset stomach. To prevent this from occurring, wash down your energy gel with sips of water.

What is the final analysis? Should athletes use them?

Energy gels provide a great option for fueling during long-distance events. During long-distance events, we need to give our bodies more fuel to prevent glycogen depletion. The American College of Sports Medicine recommends consuming about 30-60 grams of carbohydrates per hour. Most energy gels pack 23-27 grams of sugar, taking them too quickly could cause an upset stomach.

To prevent this from occurring, wash down your energy gel with sips of water.

Ohio Law Aims for Greater Protections for Young Athletes

What you need to know about revised concussion regulations

From professional sports to youth athletics, sports teams are beginning to take a closer look at concussions. A new Ohio law is aimed at keeping kids safer after suffering from this typically short-lived brain injury that is caused by a bump, blow or jolt to the head. Concussions can lead to headaches, nausea, blurry vision, dizziness, trouble focusing and concentrating, mental “fatigue,” depression, or a change in sleep patterns, to name a few symptoms.

Ohio House Bill 143, signed into law in February, is designed to keep kids safe. Forty-eight states have now passed youth concussion legislation designed to protect young athletes. It is part of the cultural shift to pay closer attention to sports concussions.

The new law does the following:

- Mandates that parents and athletes submit a signed letter stating they received and reviewed a concussion information sheet.
- Requires that coaches and referees involved in interscholastic sports hold a pupil activity permit (PAP) from the Ohio Department of Education. The PAP includes a mandatory training program for concussion and concussion recognition.
- States that athletes cannot return to play until they are properly evaluated and receive written clearance from a physician or other licensed healthcare provider.
- Requires that coaches and referees involved in interscholastic sports hold a pupil activity permit (PAP) from the Ohio Department of Education. The PAP includes a mandatory training program for concussion and concussion recognition.
- The new law ensures that if there is a suspected concussion, the young athlete is immediately pulled out of play. It also ensures proper evaluation by a healthcare professional prior to returning to play.

“...There is growing evidence that undiagnosed, unrecognized or poorly treated concussions can significantly prolong the recovery period. This can take anywhere from the expected short, one- to two-week recovery to months or possibly even longer,” says Richard Figler, MD, a Cleveland Clinic primary care sports medicine physician and concussion specialist.

“This new law is meant to protect the athlete.”

He adds, “If you are playing sports, know the signs and symptoms of concussion. When in doubt, sit it out. You only get one brain — protect it.”

The new Ohio law went into effect on April 26.
A Better Game of Golf Is All About the Preround Routine

By Matt Lorenzi, PT, DPT

How many times have you walked up to the tee box, swung your driver five to ten times, gradually increasing the speed each time, and then teed off and hopped into the cart to get to your ball? All of a sudden on holes five or six, you become much more fluid with your swing. Your body feels looser and you are making better contact with the ball. Then you think to yourself that you are finally feeling warmed up. Now, imagine if you spent just a little more time preparing your body before the start of the round.

A golf-specific warm-up can be highly beneficial to your game. It will have your body ready to perform at 100 percent from the first drive to the last putt of your round. The main goal of a warm-up is to get you physically ready for the nine or 18 holes that you are going to play. Benefits of warming up include:

- faster contraction of muscles
- increased blood flow to active muscles
- improved flexibility and mobility of joints and muscles
- increased muscular strength, power and force
- increased muscular endurance

A professional golfer’s warm-up or pre-round preparation takes a considerable amount of time, but for the recreational golfer it should take from 10 to 20 minutes.

There are two specific parts to consider when designing a tailored warm-up for golfers. The first part is the general warm-up that you should last five to 10 minutes and include movements or activity that will carry over to all parts of your golf game, involving your upper and lower spine, shoulders and hips. These include activities such as reversing your swing (perform a left-handed swing if right-handed), upper trunk or pelvic rotations, and shoulder lift/rotation exercises. All are essential movements for your golf swing and game. So, next time you go to tee up, set aside some time for a proper warm-up. It may be just the thing you need to help lower your score.

Cleveland Clinic Rehabilitation and Sports Therapy physical therapist Matt Lorenzi, PT, DPT, sees patients at the Twinsburg Family Health Center and Canfield Orthopaedics and Rehabilitation locations and is also a member of the Golf Performance Special Interest Group. For more information or to make an appointment, call 216.444.6262.

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For a tour of the Cleveland Clinic Sports Health Complex just off I-480 in Garfield Heights, please email sports-health@ccf.org.

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Q&A: Meet Two of Our Team Members

Jason A. Genin, DO, and Zenos Vangelos, DO, recently brought their sports health practices from Cleveland Clinic’s Lorain Institute to Cleveland Clinic Sports Health locations in Cuyahoga County. Dr. Vangelos also continues to see patients in Lorain County at the Richard E. Jacobs Health Center. Both are primary care sports medicine physicians who see adults, adolescents and children.

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To avoid chronic problems and longer rehabilitation times, treatment for musculoskeletal, sports-related injuries should not be delayed for seniors. Initial care consists of protection, rest, ice, compression and elevation. This should be followed up by a guided and progressive rehabilitation program. Physical therapy should also focus on range of motion, flexibility and strength. Alternative training methods should be incorporated for a safe and timely return to activity.

Other issues to consider

Older athletes must also pay closer attention to temperature-related illness. Heat illness can occur due to the increased risk of dehydration, decreased sweat gland function and impaired blood flow in response to elevated core temperatures. Sometimes medications, such as beta-blockers and diuretics, can create additional issues and may increase risk of heat illness.

By applying many of the same guidelines used by younger athletes for training, injury management and injury prevention, and by being more aware of the physical changes that occur as part of the maturation process, the senior athlete can stay active for a lifetime.

If you are a senior, be sure to consult a medical professional if you are planning to start an exercise routine or if you are a senior athlete experiencing physical changes.

Getting Started with Exercise

Regular activity helps maintain good health and physical independence as we age. The following are recommended:

- Low-impact aerobic or endurance exercises such as walking, swimming and dancing
- Strengthening exercises (after medical clearance) such as weight machines or elastic bands. Consider a personal trainer for proper technique if you have not done this recently.
- For balance, strength, flexibility try tai chi or senior yoga

AJ Cianflocco, MD, is a sports medicine physician. He provides care at Cleveland Clinic’s Euclid Hospital and Sports Health Center in Garfield Heights. For an appointment with Dr. Cianflocco or any of our primary care sports medicine doctors, call 877.440.TEAM.