DON'T BE A KNEE JERK

There's no guarantee that you won't injure that delicate joint (58 percent of sports injuries are to the knee), but conditioning will certainly lessen the risk.

By Nancy Colasurdo

Over six months have passed, but Christina Kovaleski still remembers the chilling *pop* and the uneasy feel of her knee touching places it shouldn't inside her skin. "I was going to drive the basket," says Kovaleski, a 20-year-old student at Georgian Court College in New Jersey. "I planted my foot, and my weight shifted. It happened that quickly."

It was just the second game of the season in Kovaleski's sophomore year. A couple of years earlier, when she was a standout basketball player at Bishop Ahr High School, she had looked forward to a college career that involved layups, not being laid up. Now there were visits to the doctor, painful exercises and nagging doubts. "I was totally devastated," Kovaleski says. "I had never really thought about the possibility that it could happen to me."

But the truth is, that scenario is being played out more and more frequently around the country. If you haven't experienced the trauma of a knee injury yourself, chances are you know someone who has. Yet although the numbers show that there's reason for concern, conscientious conditioning can help keep you from becoming a statistic.

WHO'S GETTING HURT

According to a 1995 study by Mary Lloyd Ireland, M.D., an orthopedic surgeon, more high-school girls than boys experience major sports injuries in game play—and the knee is the body part that's injured 58 percent of the time. The news from an NCAA surveillance survey of basketball players was equally foreboding: Females, it reported, were eight times as likely to sustain a tear of the knee's anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) as males.

Fans of the scholastic soccer played by girls in central New Jersey's Mercer County can easily give faces to those statistics. In fact, three of the last four strikers to hit the 100-goal career plateau in that part of the state have had their knees reconstructed. Just two years ago a high-school basketball team in Mercer was depleted to nearly nothing by knee injuries. And that's just one county, a very small sample of what's happening across the country. For some high-profile proof, look no farther than Olympic gold medalist Michelle Akers. The U.S. National Soccer Team phenom has had more knee operations than you can count on one hand. The sad fact is that "ACL" has become a common term in the vocabulary of people who spend a lot of time on courts and playing fields.

Though all this may sound intimidating, and studies show that there's no absolute guarantee of avoiding a knee injury, William Gomez, M.D., an orthopedic surgeon in Trenton, New Jersey, thinks taking preventive measures is very worth your while. He recommends a three-pronged conditioning program that includes strength, flexibility and sport-specific activities.

Ann Cutting

GET WITH THE PROGRAM

Building strength is an important first step because the stronger you are, the less likely you'll be to get tired and let down your guard. Fatigue can be devastating, and not only because you might lose a game; Gomez notes that a number of sports have higher injury rates during the second halves of games and that at ski resorts more skiers get hurt in the afternoon because their energy is starting to wear down.

When most people think of strength exercises, they tend to picture dumbbells or fancy machines. Weight training is a great idea, but it isn't the only option. "It's not critical to do weight training per se," says Gomez, who cites the example of professional football player Herschel Walker. "He was known for his trim, strong physique, but he never lifted weights in his life. Instead, he did 2,000 sit-ups and 1,000 push-ups a day."

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During the season, the training you do will probably be enough to keep you strong. But in the off-season, don't stop exercising; regular workouts will ensure that you don't lose the strength you gained in the previous months. You don't have to go to Walker's extremes in order to build strength; just choose something you like—maybe jogging, swimming, ice skating or in-line skating—and stick with it.

The second prong in Gomez's program is flexibility. Here's the bottom line: When the coach says it's time to stretch, go ahead and groan, but be sure to do it. And make it part of your personal exercise regimen as well. Stretched muscles have more "give" and so can meet the demands you make on them more easily. Think of what happens when you pull a taut rubber band too far—it breaks. The same principle applies to too-tight muscles.

Last but not least are sport-specific activities. Often it's a quick stop-and-start movement—a sharp cut to avoid a defender on the soccer field or a split-second turn to deliver an outlet pass after a rebound on the basketball court—that results in a damaged knee. You know how it is: You go one way and your knee goes another. But if you do these maneuvers regularly, Gomez points out, your muscles get accustomed to them and your body adapts. "That's why there's scissoring in soccer warmups, for instance: to get your body used to those quick changes of direction." In soccer, being able to move fast also helps you avoid contact, another knee-killer. If volleyball is your game, work on both jumping and landing properly. And if you play a sport like field hockey or lacrosse, concentrate on running long distances.

For Kovaleski, who felt she was in "pretty good" shape before her injury, the focus is on getting healthy again. She works out with weights four times a week and has started playing in pickup games to ease back into basketball. "My advice to others is, keep your body in the best condition possible," she says. "And always think positive." **h.s.s**