

Coaching The Injured Athlete

Sean Skahan

During the days leading up to the 2008 superbowl between the New England Patriots and the New York Giants, there was a short piece on the NFL network featuring Patriot Strength and conditioning coach, Mike Woicik. The story was about coach Woicik's 6 superbowl rings and his work with the Patriots and the Dallas Cowboys in the 1990's. The story featured several of current and former players who were coached by Woicik. Michael Irvin told a story of a conversation he had with coach Woicik when he suffered an ACL injury in 1989. After the injury, Coach Woicik told him "There are 6 parts of running. 2 ankles, 2 knees, and hips. Although 1 of them isn't 100%, there is no way why we can't keep you going". I found that interesting because I think that is a unique part of being a strength and conditioning coach. Obviously, you hope that your strength and conditioning program will prevent injuries from happening, but you must be prepared when your athletes suffer an injury and be there for him every which way you can be.

During my career as a strength and conditioning coach, there have been several cases of athletes suffering an injury. When athletes get injured, I have been involved in the process of keeping the rest of their bodies healthy. Earlier in my career, when an injury did occur, I would get general guidelines/directions from our staff athletic trainers and/or physical therapists. For example, if an athlete suffered a season ending lower body injury such as an ACL, the guidelines might be "just do upper body only with him/her". If an athlete sustained an upper body injury, then it would be "just do lower body exercises". I would always listen and stick with the protocol. However, sometimes I thought it didn't make sense. I would ask myself, why can't we train the other side? Or, if I have been prescribing an exercise such as a 1-leg squat prior to an injury, then why are we discontinuing 1-leg squats for the un-injured leg when the other leg is injured? I thought we were allowing our athletes to get weaker in perceived "healthy" body parts during the rehab process. I always thought that there was much more we could do for the athlete.

When an injury does occur, the thought process is that once the injury is rehabbed, they should be able to return to action quickly after. For this reason, it is important that a good relationship is established with the athletic department or team's athletic training and medical staff. When there is trust, the other professionals will see that the continuation of the strength and conditioning program is important for the athlete. That way everyone is on board working with each other while addressing the needs of the athlete and the team. There shouldn't be any reason why an injured athlete can't continue to maintain or sometimes improve their strength and conditioning while injured.

From the athlete's perspective, this may be the most challenging time in their career especially if it's the first time an athlete has suffered a long-term injury. The team needs to go about their daily business of trying to win games without the injured player. The strength and conditioning coach has to be very supportive and understanding while also being able to coach them through difficult times. In our situation, it is not uncommon for me to spend 3-4 hours a day, 7 days a week with an injured player.

During the last 2 seasons, our team has been exposed to our share of injuries including soft-tissue and other “freak” injuries including broken bones and lacerations. Most of them have required a rehabilitation/healing time of a minimum of 6 weeks. When injuries do occur, after the initial healing process and evaluation, the rehab process begins for the athlete. I would then begin to incorporate the program that will work every other part of his/her body while they are also spending additional time with our A.T. and/or P.T. Before the program is started, it is important to understand what the athlete may or may not be able to do. Exercises that cause any pain or discomfort are not done. Another aspect that we address is their functional movement screen. We try to use corrective exercises the best we can during this time.

The bottom line is that the strength and conditioning coach can and should be a significant part of the process during a major injury. In addition, the strength and conditioning coach can use this time to demonstrate a level of care for the athlete that he is potentially unable to show in group settings. Some of the best relationships between strength and conditioning coaches and athletes often come out of serious injury. It’s interesting to note that Michael Irvin thanked Mike Woicik publicly when he was recently inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame calling him the best strength and conditioning coach in the National Football League.

Sean Skahan has been a strength and conditioning coach since 1998. During that time he has worked with several athletes who are now playing in the NHL, NFL, and MLB. Sean received his Bachelor of Science degree (B.S.) from U-Mass Boston in 1998. After that, he received his Masters in Kinesiology (M.Ed.) from the University of Minnesota in 2000. He became a Certified Strength and Conditioning Specialist (C.S.C.S.) in 1999. Check out his Blog at <http://seanskahan.wordpress.com/>.