

# Sports Medicine Monthly

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## CAN I STILL PLAY WITH THIS INJURY?

Volume 4, Issue 5, December 2012

In October of 2010, we dealt specifically with general guidelines that govern returning to athletics after an injury. We focused on

- 1) Guidelines and Timelines for Tissue Healing, and
- 2) The Stepwise Progressive Nature of an Effective Rehabilitation.



Moving on from there, it is not uncommon for any sports medicine professional to hear the phrase: "can I still play with this injury?" From a sports medicine clinician standpoint, this can sometimes be one of the hardest questions to answer. Not because of uncertainty about the injury or its prognosis, but simply because there are times where you know the answer that you are going to give is not the most positive news for an athlete or their parents to hear. No one gets enjoyment out of watching anyone lose access to a sport, a career, or whatever for that matter due to an injury. As a clinician though, we have to find that line of what is safe to play with and what is not. Sometimes this line is very easy to determine as with injuries such as concussions, ACL tears, or significant muscular strains where the possibility for secondary injury is tremendous. In contrast though, many times this line is not as fixed as it may seem. There can be several small factors that play into these decisions that very commonly shift one's playing status from "full go" to "no go."

Among these are the following:

1. Risk for secondary injury?
2. Demands of the sport and the competition in question?
3. Individual ability of the athlete?

## Step 1: Risk for Secondary Injury: Can I Injure it Further???

This question is probably one of the best ways to start out answering the speculation around playing with injuries. However, the consistent answer for this is almost always a yes. Simply because damaged tissue is much less capable of defending itself against a secondary injury. Much like a house that has been partially destroyed by a tornado or hurricane doesn't require storm force winds to finish it off, usually most injuries don't require the same level of force to injure them further. Therefore, let's look at this question from a slightly different angle to better answer what may be the real underlying issue:



*Does it really matter if I injure it further?*

or....

*Would the recovery, rehab, and treatment be any different if I injure it further?*

The answer to this question can go either way, and it deals with the exact nature of the injury. From a very broad and generalized standpoint though, usually the following injuries would answer as follows:

- Minor Ankle Sprain: Most likely a no, with a brace
- ACL Tear: Definitely yes
- Bone Bruises: Most likely no
- Microfracture/Stress Fracture: Yes
- Casted Finger Fractures: Probably a no
- Concussion: Definitely yes

As this is step #1, this is also where having the best sports medicine care and expertise can make all the difference.



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## Step 2: Demands of the Sport & The Competition in Question

### Demands of the Sport:

Each sport requires significantly different demands on the body. A soccer midfielder could still be quite successful with a general rotator cuff strain, but such an injury could also be grossly disabling to a basketball or volleyball athlete. Therefore, a large portion of the "playing with injuries" question is what does the sport require them to do? So even if the athlete can pass step one, which is obtaining medical clearance to participate, the second step to pass is could the athlete fulfill the demands of the sport? Most of the time this is usually a very significant limiting factor for athletes who have been able to clear the first step of medical clearance.



### Competition in Question:

Even if an athlete can pass medical clearance to play and even if they could fulfill the demands of their sport, a subsequent question then comes into play:

### *Should I still compete?*

This decision is 100% the choice of the athlete and their parents/guardians if the athlete in question is a minor. Most of the time medical advice doesn't usually get into the question of should an athlete play. We simply give the pros and cons of playing vs. not playing in order to allow the patient and their family to make an informed decision on their own. In that, two variables usually come into question.

#### 1) **Game vs. Scrimmage**

-As scrimmages don't count in the record books, most injured athletes are quick to miss these events in order to get as much rest and rehab as possible.

#### 2) **Time of the Season:**

-Games carry greater weight as the season continues; especially in tournaments. Therefore, usually it is more important for the athlete to play.

## Step 3: Individual Ability of the Athlete

In athletics, we see amazing feats of grit and determination. Athletes push their bodies to the utmost limits and even then some. This is what we enjoy in our athletes, the refusal to quit under pressure. However, individualized people are just that, individual, and they react and respond in very different ways. Therefore, this becomes the third and final question of can I play:



### *Can the athlete do it?*

This portion of participation status is usually described as one's "pain tolerance" or "mental toughness." Some athletes seem to be able to flip a switch and turn off the pain or difficulty like a light bulb but others cannot. Some athletes are writhing under what may seem like the smallest of injuries whereas others have an amazing ability to control themselves under terrible situations such as fractures or dislocations.

From a sports medicine standpoint, the health of our patients and our student athletes is primary. It is the focus of what we do and why we do it. In the world of athletics, it is more rare then it may seem to boil down these choices to one easy question. Playing with injuries is a challenging decision-making process each time it comes up. However, with the few general guidelines discussed in this month's edition, this question may be somewhat easier to answer.

## **A Note to the Reader.....**

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