



Junior golfers 'ageing' early

Children and teenagers today face different physical challenges to previous generations, and not all of them are doing the right thing by their bodies.



Michelle Wie, who's nursed a prolonged wrist injury this year, is a typical example of the injuries that can befall young players.

The greatest positive influence that golf has witnessed over the past quarter century is the arrival of Tiger Woods as a genuine superstar and a wonderful role model. Tiger has encouraged new people to play golf, especially minorities.

However, I'm concerned that Tiger's success has inadvertently meant some children pursue the sport with a thoughtless, even reckless, approach. Too many young golfers want to be superstars before they have developed physically. Increasingly, I'm seeing overuse and overload injuries in juniors who take to the range and bash balls at any price. I call this the 'Tiger Woods Syndrome'.

Among boys, I see a lot of upper back, spinal and wrist injuries. With girls, I notice neck as well as wrist problems. It doesn't surprise me that Michelle Wie injured her wrist this year. Here's a young woman who has been competing against men since she was 13. Can you imagine the number of balls she must have hit in order to reach an elite level at such a young age?

There are a number of reasons for injuries to junior golfers. So it's important for adults to be aware of the pitfalls that can affect them:

Sedentary lifestyles

One thing I've learned from beach training is that young people are physically weak. Even 16 to 22-year-old guys struggle with their resistance to sand as well as aerobic fitness. I agree with Percy Cerutti's comment that people are getting softer because they're not doing physical work.

More kids are looking like little 'Buddhas'. It refers to that posture where their shoulders are slumped forward. It's not only caused by consuming sugary drinks and fast foods, but from carrying heavy bags to school, watching TV and sitting in front of laptops, often playing computer games.

Many children stay in the one, fixed posture for long periods, which allows the body to adapt to that particular shape. They're not breaking up the sedentary activity – they haven't got any circuit breakers. A lot of

kids aren't doing primal movement like climbing bars, throwing, catching, and running forwards and backwards. We used to play 'crab football', being on all fours with arms behind you. All of the scout games and fun, 'break-up' sessions seem to have disappeared from schools.

Because today's kids lead a sedentary lifestyle, their perception of active exercise is impaired. And their ability to cope with and 'endure' active exercise is far less than previous generations. It's a big issue for young people. If you lose posture, you'll lose balance and rotation and the ability to do a lot of functions. And if they're weak in their teens and 20s, they'll be even weaker at 40 and 50.

Specialising too early

Another observation of the Tiger Woods Syndrome is kids who concentrate on one sport far too early. This comes at the expense of skill acquisition. I've seen teenage tennis players with poor spinal posture that's been sustained from very entrenched movement patterns. Also, kids get bored very easily – which leads to 'burn out' from playing one sport all the time.

I recently took my son to AFL Auskick and the oval was full of young boys doing different activities. It emphasised the importance of skill acquisition at an early age, especially now that many sports have been taken out of schools. I've also observed Nick Flanagan on tour. Nick undertook a variety of sports when he was growing up, such as soccer, basketball and wakeboarding. The jumping and vertical leaping in basketball has made him very powerful – he's got a dynamic spinal posture. Yet at 19, Nick became the second youngest golfer to ever win the US Amateur Championship. That shows you can still do all the other sports before you specialise.

Growth spurts and overload

Between 10 and 18, children have growth spurts when their bones grow faster than their muscles. Imagine a rubber band over

a five-centimetre metal rod. If the metal rod expands by 4cm, there will be a lot of tension through the rubber band. It's the same relationship between your bones and muscles. During growth spurts, certain muscles get tighter, such as the hip flexors. If kids are over-training when they're growing, they may start to get muscle imbalances. That's especially relevant if they're using heavy clubs.

Swinging oversize clubs can be disastrous for juniors. I'm increasingly seeing children who suffer from disc lesions – spinal deformities – because they're using clubs that are too heavy. With clubs that are too long or heavily weighted, juniors actually 'tip' the left shoulder because they can't control the load. They tend to have a massive sheer through their spine because they drop their left shoulder.

It's important that juniors speak to their local PGA professional and get clubs that are fitted properly. Clubs can always be 'cut down' and adapted. It's no use spending a fortune on a brand new set of clubs until the child has gone through his or her teenage growth spurt.

Over-exertion

Some juniors suffer from the feeling they need to be practising as hard as the best kids in their age group. But children vary in shape and size. Just because the next person is hitting 500 balls doesn't mean it will benefit you. Kids also don't understand the difference between quality practice and quantity of practice. Hence the importance of a good pre-shot routine. Jack Nicklaus once said that every ball counts, even the practice ones. That's good advice for a junior. Aside from putts, you will only hit 40 to 60 balls per round. So why would you hit 100 balls in an hour?

It's a dangerous combination when juniors try to hit the ball as far as possible without stability: Grip it and rip it like John Daly. More kids are suffering back problems because they can't control their spine angle. I've seen 20-somethings with back injuries in America, Europe, the Middle East and Australia, some of whom are state and national representatives.

The cardinal sins are hitting too many drivers and not warming up correctly. Hitting too many balls at once leads to fatigue. And when tiredness sets in your motor patterns get

weaker. Juniors would be better off practising their short game along with posture 'circuit breakers' to maintain their form. Consider that Tiger Woods was a skinny child. Rather than bashing balls on the range, he spent far more time on his short game because it would allow him to compete against the bigger kids.

Absence of coaching

Many children have too full a curriculum in a day. They have school, piano lessons or soccer practice, homework and chores – too much activity and no downtime. If the kids are wired for eight hours a day, then they need some rest for the brain.

Quite often, juniors haven't the time for proper coaching and many will start bashing balls without an understanding of golf fundamentals. A PGA professional can set them on a pathway of development rather than haphazard information that can cause injury and turn them off the game. Most good coaches also know how much a child can do at a certain age: what load they can take and how much they should be doing.



The message is that golf is a great sport for young people. But it's a society issue rather than golf that is causing injuries. We all need to understand their limitations, otherwise we may have a pandemic problem to address.

For more advice, contact Ramsay McMaster at The Melbourne Golf Injury Clinic on (03) 9569 9448 or mobile 0407 432 282.



Training ages for juniors

To break up the sedentary lifestyle, make sure your child does regular active exercise. Take them to a physiotherapist for a physical assessment, especially about 12 years of age when they start to do a lot more study. I recommend that boys and girls should use 'spiky' balls to massage parts of their body and correct posture imbalances (*The Healthy Golfer, June 2007*).

Ages 6-10

Games should be fun – play therapy – and not taken too seriously. Kids will start to boost their motor patterns and co-ordination skills. They should try Go-Go Golf, AFL Auskick and soccer.

Ages 10-16

Children undergo a massive growth spurt and need to gain 'posture awareness'. (The First Tee program – managed by Golf Australia and PGA of Australia – has already introduced posture programs into their camps.) They should do a cross-pollination of sports for skill acquisition: basketball, swimming, shuttle runs and beach jogging. It's important to develop good fundamentals with a heavy emphasis on proper technique and sequencing of the body.

Ages 16-20

It's time to specialise but young people still need a balanced life and break up the amount of practice. Also, get a postural and skeletal screening from a physiotherapist. In consultation with a PGA professional and golf-specific trainer, this will ensure they're gradually making correct steps to full function.