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BURNOUT IN YOUTH SPORTS: *UNDERSTANDING AND PREVENTION*

by Robin Vealey and Melissa Chase, *"Best Practice for Youth Sport"*

"I don't know, Mom, I just feel burned out." As a parent, what would you do if you heard this? We all have a vague understanding of burnout, but should we advise our kids to drop out, take a break, make some changes, or suck it up? Because *burnout* is a popular term, we need to carefully consider what is true and not true about burnout in youth athletes.

What Is Burnout?

Burnout is a negative psychological and physical state in which young athletes feel tired, less able to perform well, and less interested in playing their sports. Three symptoms characterize burnout.

Physical and Emotional Exhaustion

Although it is common for athletes to get tired after training sessions or competitions, the exhaustion associated with burnout involves the depletion of emotional and physical resources beyond the typical tiredness that comes and goes throughout a sport season. Parents may notice kids feeling too tired to do things outside their sport, feeling emotionally drained and lethargic, and wanting to take a break from sport.

Reduced Sport Accomplishment

The second symptom can be a lack of performance success or inconsistent performance, or it can be more about the perception on the part of the athlete that she is not playing up to her potential. The athlete may feel that she's not getting anywhere - for example, not improving or moving forward.

Devaluation of Sport

Devaluation means a reduction in value: The athlete doesn't care as much about his sport. Athletes may say "I'm sick of doing this"; "I don't care about playing anymore"; or "It's just not fun anymore." Another common symptom is questioning things - for example, "Why am I doing this?"

How Prevalent Is Burnout in Youth Sport?

Many popular media stories warn of an impending burnout epidemic in youth sport. However, research has identified only a very small percentage (1-2%) of adolescent athletes who have experienced severe burnout. It is true, though, that the majority of youth athletes surveyed admitted to having experienced low to moderate levels of burnout (Gustafsson, Kentta, Hassmen, & Lundqvist, 2007; Raedeke & Smith, 2004). Athletes report more burnout as they increase in age from 7 to 17 years (Harris & Watson, 2014).

What Causes Burnout in Youth Athletes?

Several factors contribute to burnout in youth athletes. We've categorized them into three groups: overload factors, social climate factors, and personality factors (see table 11.1).

Table 11.1 Factors Related to Burnout in Youth Athletes		
Overload factors	Social climate factors	Personality factors
Overstress	Pressure from parents	Trait anxiety
Overtraining	Negative coaching behaviors	Weak coping skills
Staleness	Feeling trapped in sport participation	Negative perfectionism
	Lack of personal control	Obsessive passion
		Unidimensional identity

Overload Factors

Overload factors represent what people usually think about when they hear that someone is burned out. Previously in this chapter, you learned that overstress involves demand that exceeds athletes' abilities to cope, such as when they are overloaded without adequate physical and mental recovery. As discussed in chapter 9, overtraining is the result of excessive training and inadequate recovery, which typically leads to decreased performance and psychological distress (Richardson, Andersen, & Morris, 2008). The difficulty for coaches is determining how much overload (an essential, useful aspect of sport training) is appropriate for their athletes. Some overload is needed to induce a training effect and improved performance, but too much overload without adequate recovery results in decreased performance (called staleness), exhaustion, decreased interest in training, and negative moods (burnout). To clarify, staleness is the term typically used to describe impaired performance as the result of overtraining; burnout is a broader concept that focuses on psychological distress and decreased motivation in a previously enjoyed activity (Kentta & Hassmen, 1998) as a result of overload without adequate recovery.

Social Climate Factors

Social climate contributors to burnout are those negative aspects of the youth sport culture that are harmful to the psychological development and well-being of kids. These include pressure from parents to perform or achieve certain outcomes (e.g., winning, making the varsity team, gaining a college scholarship) and negative coaching behaviors, such as extreme controlling behaviors and developmentally inappropriate training and performance expectations. Athletes who feel trapped in their sport participation tend to be higher in burnout than athletes who were personally invested in and enthusiastic about swimming (Raedeke, 1997). This occurs when athletes do not really want to participate but feel they have to maintain their involvement in sport based on social pressure from others.

It has been argued that burnout is not a response to stress but rather a response to the social climate of highly organized youth sport, in which young athletes are highly controlled and inhibited in their identity development (Coakley, 1992). According to this perspective, stress is a symptom of burnout, but not the cause. Interviews with 15 elite youth swimmers who experienced burnout indicated that these athletes

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became powerless to control what was happening in their lives and their personal development. The result of this highly controlling, overstructured quality of youth sport was burnout. This explanation for burnout is important because it identifies the roots of burnout as the youth sport culture, as opposed to some personal failure or lack of competence (e.g., toughness) in young athletes.

Personality Factors

Although the structure of youth sport and the behavior of coaches and parents are critical in influencing burnout, several personality factors have been related to burnout in youth athletes. Trait anxiety and weak coping skills are obvious factors, based on their importance in the stress process discussed previously. Negative perfectionism (Hill, 2013) and obsessive passion (Martin & Horn, 2013) are examples of personality factors that create extreme aspirations and

irrational needs (inability to accept mistakes, inflexible goals, compelling pressure to participate) in relation to one's sport participation. Interestingly, positive or adaptive perfectionism (high standards, organizational skill, achievement orientation) and harmonious passion (loving one's sport without feeling controlled by it) is related to lower levels of burnout. Unidimensional identity, also related to burnout, was identified in chapter 10 as a dangerous narrowing of a child's self-concept based on overexclusive specialization in sport. Youth sport athletes should protect themselves from burnout by engaging in different types of activities to define themselves in multidimensional ways.

Personal Plug-In

Have You Been Burned Out?

Did you ever experience burnout as a youth athlete? Describe how it felt: Were all three burnout symptoms present?

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Consider the specific factors that led to this experience of burnout for you. Why do you think it happened? How did it affect your sport experience, particularly your motivation and choices about staying in sport?

Strategies to Help Athletes Avoid and Deal With Burnout

1. Although definitiveness is lacking, it is thought that physical and emotional exhaustion serves as a first indicator of developing burnout in young athletes. Observing these symptoms should prompt adult coaches and parents to intervene immediately and work with the athlete to find the best strategy to ensure some rest, recovery, and mental rejuvenation.
2. Identify athletes whose personalities or life situations predispose them to burnout, and make it a point to intervene with guidance and suggestions to help them achieve without crossing the line into harmful training behaviors. One recommendation is to identify a sport psychology consultant who can work with youth athletes to enhance their mental approaches to competition. Gaining perspective and developing skills to move from negative types of passion and perfectionism toward more adaptive forms of these characteristics would be useful.
3. Anyone (parent or coach) can help young athletes learn active coping skills. Better lifestyle management, healthier decisions, more rational perspectives on competition, and skill in identifying and pursuing personal mastery goals are all coping skills that can be learned by young athletes.
4. Guide young people in adopting multiple areas of interest and achievement. Such variety and multidimensionality guard against burnout that occurs from a single-minded obsession gone awry.
5. Listen to your kids, and clarify whether they want to continue in a sport. This is difficult for parents, especially when they observe the special talent a young athlete has in a particular sport only to see him decide to give it up. Although we agree that parents have an initial role in getting kids to try different sports, it doesn't work for athletes to feel compelled to stay in a sport only because of their parents.
6. Parents know best the vast array of stressors operating in a young athlete's life, so it's up to parents to hold the line in staking out recovery time for their children (often despite coaches' and the young athletes' protests). Someone has to be in charge and protect the health and well-being of the athletes, particularly since they're young.
7. Lead the charge for developmentally appropriate practice in youth sport. The excessive control and exploitation of youth athletes to pursue adult-mandated goals such as early specialization, as well as an emphasis on winning over athlete development, lead to burnout and dropping out. Follow the guidelines in the long-term athlete development model (Balyi, Way, & Higgs, 2013) presented in chapter 5 so that the emphasis is on a progressive development of skills, a gradual introduction to competition, a focus on enjoyment and the nurturing of motivation, and a lifelong commitment to physical activity.

Learn more about [Best Practice for Youth Sport](#) and other offerings from Human Kinetics.

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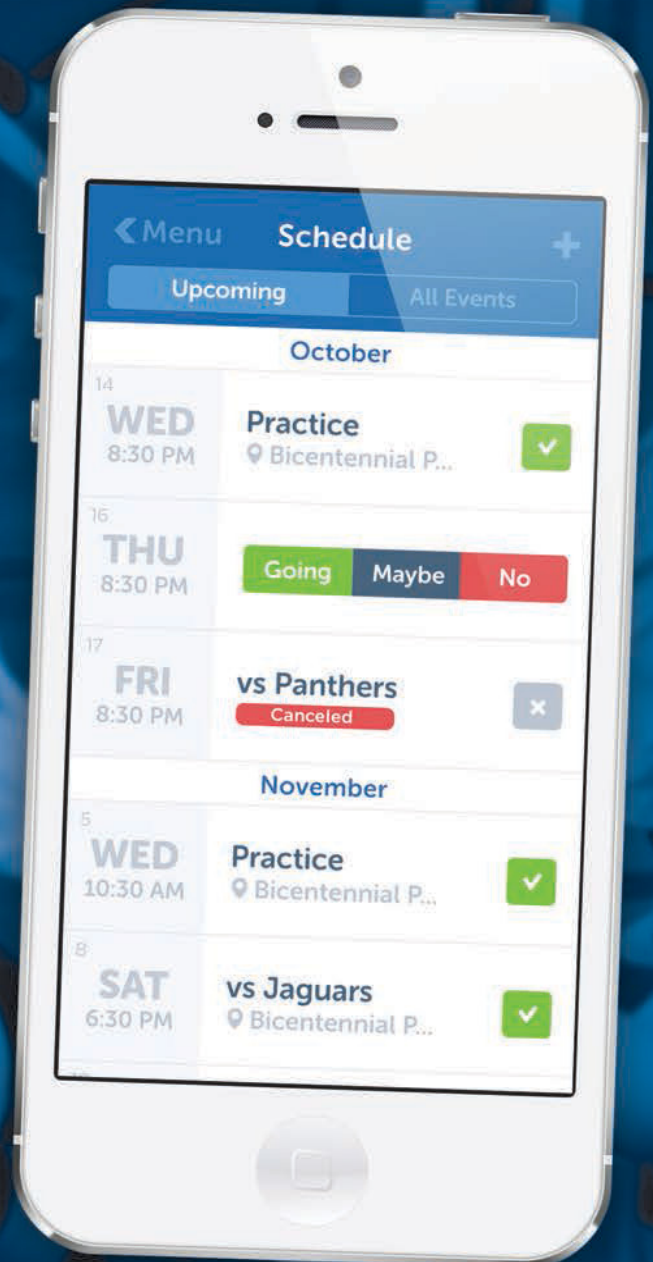
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Michael Webster

Head Volleyball Coach

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Number of Players: 12 Variations can allow for fewer players (10)

Number of Balls: Steady Supply

Objective: This drill emphasizes the need to sideout at a designated percentage (66%). The higher the level of play the higher the sideout percentage needed to be successful.

Directions:

1. Team A is always the serve receive team and Team B is always the serving team.
2. Team A will serve receive 18 balls (rotate after each ball). This will allow Team A to SR 3 balls in all 6 rotations. By rotating after each ball it speeds up the pace of preparation.
3. Team B can be set up to be as competitive as the coach wants them to be. Each served ball is played out.
4. Each Team A win is 1 point. Each Team B win is 2 points. Team A is trying to get to 12 or more points before Team B gets to 14. 12 of 18 balls = 66%.

Variations: You can use as few as four players on Team A (S,MH,OH,RS) with one OH and one MH playing only the OH and MH front row positions. Can only serve designated serve receivers.

Note: Used to evaluate how well certain lineups side out and what rotations need more work. In the variation, you can evaluate individual position players against each other and how they help their team succeed. Also increases the importance of a 1st ball kill as Team A is playing 4 v 6.

MVP

Purpose: This tests your athletes in pressure situations.

Drill: Pick two players to be your MVP's...OH vs. OH, MH vs. MH or RS vs. RS (I guess you could do setters too) 6 v 6, coach enters free balls or down balls, the beginning of the games to 15 pts. Anyone who gets a kill that is not the MVP is 1 point, if the MVP scores its 2 points. After 11 points the MVP must score all the points (now they are worth 1). If at 14, the MVP doesn't score, she drops to 10.