ClinicalClues

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August 2018 No. 6

To Brace or Not to Brace the Athlete's Ankle

Do you have explicit criteria for use of an ankle brace with athletes? As a physical therapist, I think it depends on whether an athlete is currently in or out of season.

IN-SEASON

When an athlete injures an ankle during the season, the treatment goal is to get the athlete back to competition as quickly as possible, without impacting performance. Protecting the athlete from further injury is crucial, and because a brace can do this, I recommend use of an ankle brace for the remainder of the sport season. McGuine, et al. provides evidence that an ankle brace protects an athlete from further injury. (1)

Returning to sport participation is the priority. Although advanced proprioceptive exercises help decrease re-injury risk, in-season athletes rarely have time to regain full proprioception before passing a return to sport exam. An ankle brace allows safer return to play, supporting the ankle while proprioception continues to improve. Bellows and Wong describe how a brace can be an option when an athlete is lacking proprioception (2).



Braces such as this one, which replicates functional taping, help to provide active athletes with additional stability

OFF-SEASON

When an athlete injures the ankle during the off-season the treatment of an ankle injury focuses on performance enhancement and prevention of re-injury. Most athletes do not require a brace during off-season unless they are experiencing pain with jumping activities.

During the off-season the athlete has more time for strengthening and conditioning for the sport, allowing progression through advanced proprioceptive activities. Examples of these activities are:

- Olympic bar squatting on an unstable surface with eyes closed
- Low height single leg box drops with eyes closed
- Standing on a stability ball with one or two legs

Safe progression through these challenging activities requires time not available to an in-season athlete.

PREVENTION

When should an ankle brace be worn for prevention of recurrent injury? A guideline I follow is to use an ankle brace when an injured athlete has missed competition during two consecutive seasons despite being compliant with a rehabilitation program. The brace should be worn to provide needed support to remain competitive while also preventing re-injury.

1. *McGuine TA, Hetzel S, Wilson J, Brooks A. The effect of lace-up ankle braces on injury rates in high school football players.* Am J Sports Med. *2012; 40(1):49-57.*

2. *Bellows R, Wong, C. The effect of bracing and balance training on ankle sprain incidence among athletes: a systematic review with meta-analysis.* Int J Sports Phys Ther. *2018; 13(3): A203–A276*

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