Health

R.I.C.E. Helps Injured Athletes Get Back in the Game

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In the middle of February, fans of Davidson College witnessed their star guard, Stephen Curry, land awkwardly and injure his ankle. Unfortunately, for many athletes and their fans, this scene is all too familiar. The burning question: ''When will the athlete return to play?'' In this case, Stephen Curry was back in action the following week. How was he able to return to the court so quickly? Traditional ankle sprain treatments could have sidelined him for weeks. In this article we will discuss advances in treatment that allow speedier return to play for the injured athlete.

We consider four rehabilitation phases of injury before return to play. Using the R.I.C.E. (R=rest, I=ice, C=compression, E=elevation) principle, we first limit, then decrease swelling. Next, we focus on restoring motion of the injured joint. This is followed by restoring strength of the supporting muscles. We then begin sport- specific activities.

Advances in manufacturing technology and enhanced understanding of the recovery process have allowed traditional modalities to be combined and customized for each individual athlete. This allows for more rapid response to treatment; hence, earlier return to play. One such advance allows for combination of ice and compression. The amount of compression an A. C. E. wrap can provide to the injured area is inconsistent--either too much or too little. The therapeutic benefit of an ice pack is limited to the area of contact. Newer products deliver both adjustable cold therapy and intermittent compression simultaneously. They are customized for any major joint. With this anatomical contour, the application of both compression and ice is distributed more evenly and completely around the injured body part. Using these combination therapy systems, the time required for the athlete to complete the first stage of recovery is diminished. Once this is achieved a more aggressive approach to the final stages of recovery and earlier return to play can be achieved.

Another traditional staple of treatment involves the application of athletic tape to support the injured area. This is another treatment modality that has recently been improved. For anyone who watched the Beijing Olympics, it seemed every athlete had one or more joints ''striped'' with colored tape. This was not a fashion statement; nor was it traditional athletic tape. Although the Kinesio® Taping Method was developed over 25 years ago in Japan, it recently has gained popularity in training rooms the world over. When applied to the skin, it can decrease pain and edema, increase range of motion, and improve ligament and tendon alignment. The tape has the ability to stretch with an incredible elasticity. It is breathable and the heat-activated adhesive will adhere for days at a time. Whereas traditional athletic tape is only useful for a few hours at a time and only in the last stage of treatment, Kinesio Taping provides benefits in all stages of recovery and can be worn for multiple days at a time.

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When used under the supervision of a trained sports medicine staff, these newer techniques and therapies have shown a marked decrease in the amount of time an athlete remains sidelined by an injury. Once the athlete is able to return to play, continued strengthening and sport specific training will help to prevent future injury.

The author would like to acknowledge Danielle Willsie, MS, ATC/LAT co-author of this article. Danielle is an athletic trainer at Albion College specializing in injury prevention and ''pre-injury'' education.

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