Doctors help keep Buffs in game

Injury prevention part of regimen of athletic training

Dr. Sourav Poddar, a physician for the University of Colorado-Boulder's sports teams, examines athlete Nicole Karris' injured knee. Trainers look at films of football players and other athletes and keep track of injury rates and patterns to see how they can lower the number of injuries from year to year. Jonathan Castner

Beth Potter

BOULDER — Doctors and trainers who work with student athletes at CU-Boulder want to limit the athletes' noncontact sports injuries.

While the goal may sound simple, its execution often can be complex, said Sourav Poddar, a team physician for the University of Colorado football program, as well as other student-athlete programs at CU-Boulder and CU-Denver.

For example, an anterior cruciate ligament, or ACL, knee tendon injury can be "season-ending" for many student athletes, Poddar said. Research shows female student-athletes have a higher risk of noncontact, ACL injuries than do their male counterparts, Poddar said.

To meet the problem head-on, CU trainers screen every new athlete who comes to the university to see if he or she is predisposed toward certain injuries. After the screening, each athlete is given a specific strength program to try to limit noncontact injuries, Poddar said.

Trainers look at training films for Buffaloes football players and other athletes and keep track of injury rates and patterns to see if they can lower the number of sports injuries every year, Poddar said. In addition, university trainers have added well-received strength-training programs used at other universities to their training regimens here, he said.

Sportsmetrics — an ACL injury-prevention program specifically for female athletes — is one training regimen used in the CU system, Poddar said. The program includes stretching and warm-up exercises, jumping exercises, and strength and flexibility training exercises to ward off injuiries. It was developed by the Cincinnati SportsMedicine Research and Education Foundation. The PEP program, developed by the Santa Monica Sports Medicine Foundation, also is used at CU, Poddar said.

"There's a focus on the good work done all over the country on injury prevention," Poddar said. "If you get hurt, it costs you a position on the team, or a starting spot. So the big focus is on not getting hurt."

"Over-use" training injuries also can be mitigated, Poddar said. Stress conditioning coaches are active in the off-season for each sport to help athletes with the mechanics of getting stronger, he said.

Finally, CU doctors are hyper-aware of the chance for concussions in contact sports such as football, Poddar said. Coaches must go through training that helps them recognize signs of concussion, following a Colorado law that went into effect in January 2012. Colorado high school student Jake Snakenberg died in 2004 after being hit during a football game.

Legal guidelines now require coaches to bench players in Colorado if they believe the athletes have suffered head injuries.

While it's tough to prevent a concussion from happening, doctors and trainers have tried to work out strategies to keep athletes better protected, Poddar said.

"The public awareness has been great," he said. "What we hope for is that we can recognize these (concussions) better, and that people aren't hiding the symptoms."

Athletic trainers at CU are on the front lines of identifying the sports medicine problems that team doctors might end up treating, said Miguel Rueda, head trainer for all of CU-Boulder's athletic teams. After working with Poddar for seven years, Rueda said, the two know each other's strategies.

"We've gotten really good at solving injuries as they come about," Rueda said. "It does nobody any good when our athletes get injured. But we do pretty well from a medical standpoint."

Screening tests are especially important for college freshmen, who may have been the very best at their sports in high school but now are competing on a wider playing field, Rueda said. As competition gets tougher, strength and conditioning get even more important, he said.

That's where Dave Foreman, CU's strength and conditioning coach, comes in, Rueda said. Foreman evaluates students' form and technique to come up with strategies to keep them from getting hurt, Rueda said. It makes no sense for an athlete to start a heavy weight-lifting program if they don't know how to go about it in the right way, he said. Many schools worry about "chasing the number" on how much an athlete can lift, Rueda said, whereas CU trainers are worried more about an athlete's health and well-being.

"Our focus is on proper form, proper technique and increasing the amount of weight appropriately," Rueda said.

Researchers and other professionals involved with the CU-Denver Anschutz Medical Center often have a role to play in sports medicine for student athletes, Rueda said, from disseminating information about altitude training to sleep research. An athlete's sleep and diet habits can be just as important as the doctor screenings and daily training regimens, he said.

"The message is, nothing is easy," Rueda said. "It takes hard work and it takes dedication, and it takes investment" to be a good athlete.