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MLB's Real Health Scare

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Written by [kylestack](#) on 3/3/2011 9:13 PM

St. Louis Cardinals fans were recently struck with the kind of news that's dreaded by fans of every Major League Baseball team—their pitching ace needs Tommy John surgery. Adam Wainwright, who was the runner-up in last year's National League Cy Young vote, was diagnosed with severe pain in the ulnar collateral ligament (UCL) of his right elbow last week; it will require season-ending reconstructive elbow surgery for the 29-year-old right-hander. I think MLB can help cut down on these injuries by placing importance on pitching technique.



Pitch counts, enacted to prevent overuse, have done little to stymie the number of young pitchers going under the knife. Proper technique is the way to help correct this problem. A pitcher's technique is often overhauled in the pros because of poor mechanics they've shown at the amateur level.

The UCL's primary function is elbow stabilization, which is why it's critical to the throwing motion. When overuse of the ligament sets in, pitchers experience pain on the inside of the joint. Tommy John surgery corrects that by replacing the UCL with a forearm tendon. Recovery time takes 12-18 months. (The procedure is named after former MLB pitcher Tommy John, who in 1975 became the first pitcher to throw again in the Majors after receiving the surgery.) If you have an idea for how a pitcher can avoid overuse, then let me know.

MLB and college teams have established pitch counts, but where's is the evidence of their effectiveness? Washington Nationals phenom Stephen Strasburg was on a strict pitch count at San Diego State University—one start per week with a cap of 115 pitches—and he still required Tommy John surgery last summer. Wainwright has been carefully managed by the Cardinals, but they say his recent injury is linked to arm troubles dating back to 2004. Dozens of other current MLBers have undergone the same procedure.

I wish MLB would hire instructors to teach Little Leaguers and high school pitchers a proper throwing motion. Don't put that responsibility on current Little League coaches, who aren't necessarily qualified to do so. Pitch counts have proven ineffective; young pitchers seem too susceptible to arm injuries given how much teams micro-manage their activity. But proper technique, practiced from a young age, could be the way for future MLB pitchers to avoid the operating room and stay on the pitcher's mound.

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