

Injuries That May Keep You from Winning the U.S. Open Golf Championship

By: Dr. Brandon Crouch

Prior to the first round of the U.S. Open Golf Championship, Tiger Woods had not even walked a full 18 holes of golf since having arthroscopic surgery on his left knee to repair some torn cartilage. If you followed last months U.S. Open then you can understand why it will be known as one of the most watched tournaments of all time. The electricity really started when Tiger Woods made a 12 ft putt for birdie to push the tournament to an 18 hole playoff and then won in dramatic fashion in a sudden death playoff after 91 holes of golf. What made it even more intense was watching the facial expressions of pain from Tiger as his knee would give him piercing pain at any given time.

To make the story even more real is that Tiger publically announced just days after the U.S. Open that he was playing with a double stress fracture in his left Tibia and a torn ACL (Anterior Cruciate Ligament). Even though other sports may involve contact with helmets, running at fast speeds, or slap shots with a puck, golf can be very demanding on many aspects of your body even if you're the best in the world! Now with Tiger Woods' future golf game at stake he has decided to take the rest of the 2008 season off to have ACL surgery and give time for the stress fractures to heal.

Okay, so you may never find yourself in contention to win the U.S. Open. I am sure however, that your golf game is just as important to you as Tiger's is to him. If you like playing and want to continue playing then there are some injuries you need to watch out for. Just a few of the more common injuries are listed below and what can cause them. Please know this information is strictly for educational purposes only and does not replace the diagnosis or treatment recommendations from a qualified healthcare professional.

- 1. Golfer's Elbow or Tennis Elbow:** Golfer's Elbow / Tennis Elbow is often a pinpoint pain or tenderness felt on the inner (golfer's elbow – medial epicondylitis) or outer side (tennis elbow – lateral epicondylitis) of the elbow. It is mostly felt at the point of impact or at the top of the backswing. Golfer's / Tennis Elbow is merely inflammation of the tendon that inserts into the elbow that has been strained due to repetitive use or from poor swing biomechanics. They can then be strained from lifting heavy objects or more repetitive movements.

Suggestions: When the pain is really bad ice will often help to reduce the inflammation around the tendon. Working to strengthen the muscles in the arm (biceps and triceps) as well as the forearm will also help. Wearing a strap or brace on your forearm just below your elbow is ideal to help take pressure off the tendon where it inserts into your elbow.

- 2. Shoulder Pain:** Shoulder Pain can be a lot more complicated and arise from different causes of injury since it has a lot more range of motion. Some of the most common shoulder injuries from playing golf are from rotator cuff injuries, A-C Joint inflammation, ligament instability, bursitis, or shoulder strain from decreased range of motion. Pain in

the shoulder is usually felt with motion indicating muscle or joint involvement. A qualified healthcare individual will help to identify the source of the problem and the best course of action.

Suggestions: I would first attempt to get the shoulder rehabilitated and healthy before attempting to get back to full activities. When the shoulder is inflamed ice often will help reduce the pain. I never recommend playing with an injured shoulder because you will most often change your swing to accommodate less pain and therefore set yourself up for poor habits. Should you decide to play anyway adopt a habit of slowing your backswing and try swinging on a flatter plane. This will reduce the impact from your divots and on your shoulder.

From a golf fitness perspective we want a full range of motion through your shoulders; both in a full upright position and also in a 5 iron stance. A lack of shoulder mobility will create strain on your shoulder, upper back, and neck as you try to create a full golf swing.

- 3. Knee Pain:** Although your knee has primary motion in 2 directions, it will actually have a little rotation and give side to side as well. Being a weight bearing joint it is very susceptible to injury during the golf swing due to large amount of sheer force on it during your downswing and on your follow through. Injuries to the knee can be a torn meniscus; torn or strained ACL (anterior cruciate ligament), PCL (posterior cruciate ligament), MCL (Medial Collateral Ligament), LCL (Lateral Collateral Ligament); damaged cartilage; osteoarthritis; a misaligned / poor tracking patellar bone; or inflammation on the knee.

Suggestions: Your knee is utilized every day just to get around and is therefore very valuable whether you are on the golf course or not. Avoid overuse or strain when injured or you may risk injuring it further. (Case in point would be Tiger Wood's most recent knee injury. Doctors say his double stress fracture to his knee was due to his aggressive rehabilitation to return to the golf course in time for the U.S. Open. It turned out well for him obviously by winning, but now he will have to sit the rest of the 2008 season out in order to repair a torn ACL and let the stress fractures heal.)

Rest, ice, and bracing are a great remedy for minor injuries to the knee. If therapy does not aid in healing then surgery may be the go to choice. Again, only a qualified healthcare provider will be able to direct you on the appropriate treatment based on your injury.

To aid in less sheer force and tension on your knee try wearing golf shoes without spikes or go to a tennis shoe. This will help reduce the twisting forces on your knees. Take smaller turns on your swings, use less force, and use more short irons in your play. When in doubt it is better to not play for a few weeks to help reduce the risk of more damage to your knee.

Additionally, with any injury, regardless of where it is, if you have a swing fault (poor golf swing biomechanics) then you will undoubtedly be reinjuring the troubled area /

complaint every time you go back out on the course. Unless you identify the problem and correct this pattern then the problem will continue to re-occur. With the elbow and shoulder some common swing faults are chicken winging, scooping, or casting. Be sure to make sure that your wrist is not flexed through impact and the handle is leading the club head all the way through to impact. Swing faults that can injure the knee would be swaying, sliding, and lack of upper and lower body rotation.

Tiger Woods' putt on the 18th green of the U.S. Open Championship to put him into a playoff with Rocco Mediate was another defining moment for his record. He then went on to win the U.S. Open in a sudden death playoff hole. For Tiger, pain was not going to keep him from playing in the U.S. Open Championship. At the top of his game and being ranked #1 in the world for 500 straight weeks does not make him invincible and he is wisely listening to his doctors. He has decided to take the rest of the season off to repair his ACL and to let his stress fractures heal in his left tibia bone.

If it were you would you make the same decision to take time off? I hope so. I see many golfers in my office who have to ask themselves this very question. Is it worth further injury to get back on the golf course this weekend? If you were playing for the U.S. Open Championship... then maybe, otherwise take the smart approach and let a health professional assist you if you are having a reoccurring injury and stay off the course until it has stabilized.

Usually only two outcomes can come from playing with an injury. You will either adjust your swing causing you to have a terrible round and possibly train your body to have a bad swing habit or you will cause your injury to get worse. Either way the end result is not good.

To keep from getting injured take time to warm up before each round by stretching and swinging easy on the practice tee. If you're already facing an injury seek professional help if it doesn't resolve so you can get back on the course as quickly as possible. Teaching Golf Professionals often try to get their clients to imitate Tiger's swing. Now is the time to take a lesson from Tiger's playbook and get help when you need it most. The lesson from the Pro is that sometimes we need to attend to our ailments now in order to be our best in the future.

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Sources:

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