2006 World Cup Survival Guide

A first XI of footballing injuries

1. SHOULDER SHOCKER

Goalkeepers beware! You're more likely to dislocate your shoulders than outfield players. This is an injury that occurs when the top of the bone in your upper arm pops away from the socket of the shoulder blade.

Shoulders can dislocate by overstretching (especially if someone collides with you while your arm is extended) and falling awkwardly. A dislocation could put you out for 3 weeks to 3 months - and if it's happened once, it's easier for it to happen again.

Don't be too ambitious about how far you can reach – some Beckhamesque 35-yard screamers just don't want to be saved!

2. HAMSTRING HELL

Hamstring problems have hampered the aspirations of some of football's brightest young stars – Kieron Dyer had his eye on the World Cup until hamstring trouble cut short his season.

A hamstring injury is usually the result of pushing your body outside of its comfort zone (through overstretching, or sudden acceleration/deceleration, for example). Over stretching the muscle in the back of the leg as you go to kick the ball is a frequent cause and you're also more susceptible if your lower back is tight.

A proper warm up and a few stretches performed during play could help you avoid a hamstring injury. Practice sprinting too, because you use your hamstrings to change running speed.

3. ANKLE AGGRO

Alan Smith's World Cup dreams were shattered last season by a hideous ankle injury. Ankle problems plague footballers because the ligaments that hold the joint together are easily injured. Amateurs are at greater risk because they don't have the luxury of pristine playing surfaces.

The injury usually occurs when you 'go over' on your ankle and your foot is forced in towards your body. An ankle sprain usually heals within 1 to 6 weeks.

Look after your ankles by tying your laces firmly and taking extra care on uneven surfaces riddled with divots.

4. GROIN GRIEF

England stars Steven Gerrard and Michael Owen have both struggled with groin strains. The repetitive kicking, sliding and twisting involved in playing football make the groin strain an easy but very uncomfortable injury to pick up.

If you overstretch to kick the ball, or ask your body to deal with a sudden change of movement, such as switching direction when running, it's easy to pull the adductor muscles in your upper thigh and end up with a groin strain. Depending on severity, this injury can put you out for 3 days to 6 weeks.

To prevent a groin strain, avoid slippery playing surfaces and warm up properly – especially if you'll be chucking in sliding tackles!

5. DREADED DEAD-LEG

Many footballers have felt the dulling ache of a dead leg. This injury is often the result of a heavy blow to the top of the leg, which squashes your quadriceps muscle against the bone.

The affected area usually swells and this tingles and can temporarily affect movement. You'll usually feel better after a couple of hours, but the injury can linger for a few weeks if severe.

The injury often occurs during tackles, especially if an opponent lands heavily on your legs – so shy away from crunching tackles!

6. KNEE NIGHTMARE

Ligaments help connect the bones of the body together and there are several around your knee. A knee ligament problem ruled Robert Pires out of the last World Cup and, like Ankle Aggro, the injury is especially common among amateur players.

Awkward twists and turns, collisions and heavy landings can all play havoc with the ligaments of your knee, especially if they are at full stretch and forced away from the bone. A knee injury can keep you out of the game for 1 to 6 weeks.

Protect your knees by playing on even surfaces and avoiding players who like to throw their weight around! Strengthening your quadriceps (the muscles in your thigh) will help to stabilise and protect your knees from injury.

7. SORE SHINS

'Shin splints' are more common in younger footballers. Former England striker, Andrew Cole, suffered with the condition earlier in his career.

The injury usually occurs as a result of playing too much, playing on hard surfaces, wearing inadequate footwear or even because of the way you run! Shin splints cause pain and inflammation in the muscles at the front of the lower part of your leg. Rest can help relieve the pain, but to fully recover you will need to address the root cause of your injury. A physiotherapist should be able to help you get back on track.

8. KILLER CRAMP

Anyone who watched this year's FA Cup final between Liverpool and West Ham would have seen the agony of cramp etched on the faces of several players. Exactly why cramp occurs remains a mystery. But it is thought to be the result of dehydration in combination with a build up of toxins in the muscles surrounding the affected area. The pain is felt as a muscle goes into spasm and fails to relax.

In football, muscles such as your calves and hamstrings are more likely to get cramp. In general, pain lasts for 10 seconds to 3 minutes, but you can take action to relieve it. If the pain strikes your calf, hold the muscle with one hand and gently pull back on the toes with the other. Pointing your toes upwards can help give you an extra stretch.

Avoid cramp by maintaining good overall fitness levels, warming up properly and taking in plenty of fluid.

9. POST-MATCH PAIN

Post match pain (delayed onset muscle soreness) doesn't usually bother the pros because their bodies are in peak condition. But armchair supporters who are unused to exercise should expect some muscular discomfort to set in 42 – 72 hours after playing. This pain is thought to be the result of a build up of toxins in the muscles during exercise, but it's not a serious condition and you'll find that the more often you play sport, the less likely you are to be troubled by it.

10. METATARSAL MADNESS

The 'curse of the metatarsal' has struck many of Sven's stars in recent years. Wayne Rooney, David Beckham and Michael Owen have all suffered the agony of fracturing one of the five long, thin bones in the front of the foot.

Your metatarsal bones are vulnerable because you use them to kick the ball and they are fairly exposed. Injuries usually occur as a result of direct impact

(such as an opponent stamping on your foot), or through over use. A broken metatarsal can put you out for around 6 – 12 weeks.

Look after those pesky metatarsals by giving yourself plenty of rest between play. Always choose footwear designed for sport – not flip-flops or work shoes.

11. WINDED AND WOUNDED

Most footballers, and especially goalies, will experience the feeling of being winded at some point in their career. It's caused by an impact to the abdomen, usually in a collision with another player or being hit by the ball. The impact of the blow can cause your diaphragm to spasm, which makes you feel as though you've had your breath taken away. It can also be difficult to breathe air down into your lungs. The immediate sensation tends to last for around a couple of minutes, but it can take up to fifteen minutes to fully recover.

Try and avoid collisions, especially with players who are much heavier than you. Steer clear of goal celebrations that involve multiple players piling up on you!