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HEADLINE: Overuse led to injury;
Problems began when Ryan West pitched for three teams at age 12

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As a 12-year-old, Ryan West pitched for his middle school team, an AAU team and a youth-league team almost simultaneously.

He averaged six games a week and often pitched in three, sometimes more. He threw about 200 pitches weekly, plus he had throws from third base and shortstop.

It took a toll. His seasons ended with a separated growth plate in his right elbow, a common youth pitching injury that required three months of rest. Three years later, he partially tore a ligament in his elbow and had surgery.

Now 16, he's a healthy sophomore at Benedictine High with a low-80s fastball, college potential and a one-word answer for what he wants to do in college: "Pitch."

He also has a pitch count and a scar on his elbow, both a reminder and a warning: "Don't overthrow," he said, "because it could always be the last pitch you throw."

Said his father, Doug: "If I had a chance to go back to Ryan's AAU years, I'd probably play more of an active role in managing his time on the mound. Part of it is the kids want to succeed. It's an extremely competitive environment. And Ryan is a kid who never wanted to come off the mound."

Ryan has had tunnel vision about baseball "since he was 3 or 4 years old," said his mom, Laura. By age 9, he was playing in a youth league and AAU. He added a third team when he made his middle school squad as a sixth-grader.

Playing on three teams seemed natural; other kids did it. Ryan was a dominant pitcher with a rubber arm. About the only time he didn't take the mound was for a youth team coached by his father.

Doug West said he was aware of Ryan's number of pitches but didn't want to interfere.

"He seemed to never get tired," West said.

Ryan separated a growth plate pitching in a youth-league game. He was back to normal as a seventh-grader. He continued to pitch for three teams until he arrived at Benedictine last year. While playing JV football, he was invited to pitch in an AAU tournament in September. He hadn't thrown a baseball in eight weeks. Early in the

game, he threw a pitch, felt pain in his elbow. It was a partially torn ulnar collateral ligament.

Optional surgery followed. Ryan wasn't allowed to pick up a ball until January. He wasn't allowed to pitch until April. His appearances were limited. "When I came here is really the first time I had a pitch count," he said.

The 6-1 1/2 195-pounder regained his velocity and arm strength this season. Still, Benedictine coach Sean Ryan kept him to a 75-80-pitch limit.

Ryan's father emphasizes he is not unhappy with how his son was handled early in his career. What he hopes is that parents, coaches and players learn from his older son's story. His 9-year-old son, Brandon, is starting to play. The father is looking at Brandon's path from a different view.

"For parents of young athletes, there's a fine line between encouraging them to participate, especially at [a high level], and managing it so it doesn't go too far," he said. "I don't know how we did, to be honest. We tried to balance it."