ABSTRACT

Context: The shoulder complex is frequently injured during sports. The tremendous mobility of the shoulder makes returning to sport participation following shoulder injury a challenging task for both the clinician and athlete. The purpose of this clinical commentary is to review the current literature on return to sport criteria and provide evidence-informed and clinically useful guidelines and recommendations to aid in clinical decision making for return to sports after shoulder micro- and macro-traumatic injuries.

Evidence Acquisition: A search of the PubMed database using the terms functional tests, upper extremity testing, return to play, and shoulder injury was performed. Further evaluation of the bibliographies of the identified articles expanded the evidence. This evidence was used to inform the clinical commentary.

Results: Return to sport decision making is a sequential, criterion-based process. Assessment of patient reported outcomes, range of motion, strength, and functional performance must all be considered. Numerous tests are available for the clinician to determine whether a patient is ready to return to sports following a shoulder injury or surgery. A different set of tests should be utilized for the overhead athlete (microtrauma injury) compared to the patient with a macrotraumatic shoulder injury because of the differing demands and sports requirements.

Conclusion: Use of pre-determined criteria, available in the literature, minimizes the reliance on the subjective element alone during takes athlete progression and provides everyone involved in the process with known, pre-established, measurable markers and goals that must be achieved prior to progressing to practice and returning to competition. This type of performance progression assessment testing provides the clinician with a useful set of tools to objectively assist and guide the determination regarding when an athlete can safely progress back to practice and then return to unrestricted athletic activities.

Level of evidence: 5

Keywords: Glenohumeral joint, return to play, overhead athlete, functional tests, rehabilitation, movement system