Case report – stress fracture of the rib in a golfer

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Stress fractures of the rib have been reported in rowers¹-³ and canoeists⁴-⁵; this is the first report of a similar fracture in a golfer.

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A 45-year-old, nine handicap, right handed golfer who had played golf for 13 years, presented with a 1-month history of acute onset of right anterior chest pain while playing golf. He had one episode of similar pain when hitting a fairway wood 5 months earlier that had settled after a 6 weeks rest from golf, and no further trouble until this episode.

He had been treated elsewhere for dorsal vertebral dysfunction but clinically had a full painless range of neck and dorsal movements, and rib spring was positive over the 5/6 anterior axillary line, lung fields were normal to auscultation. Fracture of the right fifth rib was confirmed on technetium 99 bone scan (Figure 1) and radiography showed a healing fracture with no other pathology (Figure 2).

Discussion

There are two major problems; the diagnosis and the mechanics of the injury. Rowers are reported to be prone to dorsal vertebral dysfunction, or costo vertebral subluxation⁶ and may have referred pain anteriorly from these lesions, but stress fractures of the rib are well recognized in this sport and technetium 99 bone scans performed if in clinical doubt. Referred chest pain from the dorsal spine is recognized in golfers but this article must now alert clinicians to the possibilities of a stress lesion in the ribs.

This golfer was a hooker of the ball but would block the shot when he failed to rotate through the ball, rather sliding his right side under and hitting with his body before his hands. He was able to reproduce some discomfort with this swing even when his normal swing with full rotation through the shot was pain free. The author thinks it possible that rowers may have a similar problem where instead of pulling with the inside hand (farthest away from the blade) and producing a rotation of the dorsal spine, they pull too soon with the feathering, outside hand, thus blocking this rotation. Rowers changing strokeside to/from bowside may be at greater risk of stress fractures.

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