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Being a sport.

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In this Olympic year we look at the downside of keeping fit.

Many of those who do not engage in a sporting activity view those who do as mildly masochistic: puffing, panting and sweating along unyielding footpaths looks like hard work. Physical exercise, some say, is for keep-fit lunatics. Swimming, more affirm, is boring. And furthermore, it is also said, sports enthusiasts are always complaining about injuries. What is the point of it all?

Sporting activities can even be dangerous. In the last year, several professional boxers threw their last punches ever; various competitive cyclists have got off their bikes, cut down by unfeeling pedals, and thousands of athletes worldwide were in the doldrums because their training had been temporarily interrupted by a slight lesion. On the face of it, one is tempted to get rid of the lycra shorts, shelve the Nikes, dry dock the bike and hang up the boxing gloves.

So much suffering just to win a medal, earn a living or keep the belly at bay smacks of perversion, and does not inspire participation. Sport is an activity which seems fraught with injury - even death. Is it worth it?

It is when you look at the facts. For example, out of every 20,000 joggers in Spain, only one suffers

a heart attack. In most of these cases the victim had already complained of heart trouble. The majority of sports injuries are slight; part and parcel of going against gravity. A study of American joggers revealed that 30% suffered from some type of bone/muscle related lesion, all of which can be healed by a spot of rest. Inadequate preparation (70%), fatigue (17%) and lack of discipline are the causes of these mishaps. The lower body takes the brunt of the injuries; a whopping 70% with the upper body accounting for the remainder.

So, lots of suffering it appears, but there is probably a lot more among the computer user: lower back and cervical pain, headaches, eye strain, and of course the old favourite R.S.I (repetitive strain injuries). Nowhere is safe.

Boxing is another kettle of fish. It is a high-risk sport whose basic aim is to inflict injury on the opponent. A solid right-hand punch can produce the same effect as a 6.5 kg bag travelling at 32 km/h.

Other tough contact sports do provoke lesions, it cannot be denied. American football (which is affectionately but incorrectly known as "rugby" here in Spain) produced ten deaths in one year. English football, according to one study, witnesses up to 35 injuries per 1,000 hours of play.

But nothing is void of danger; pedestrians crossing the road can be run over, while domestic accidents in the UK are frankly shocking. According to a British government home accident surveillance report, 76 people were killed each week in domestic accidents - more than died in road accidents. Almost 600,000 people need emergency hospital treatment each year after colliding with other people or objects such as armchairs and furniture!

Sports injuries pale into insignificance when compared.