Kevin Love was one of many NBA stars hurt during an injury-marred 2014-15 season.

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NBA seeks to improve 'long-term health and wellness of players'

By Tom Haberstroh
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After a season marred by high-profile injuries to star players, the NBA has formed a committee to promote research into player health.

Last season, Kevin Durant, Kobe Bryant, Russell Westbrook, Carmelo Anthony, Paul George, Dwyane Wade, Chris Bosh, Dwight Howard, DeMar DeRozan and Joakim Noah each missed at least 15 games with injuries.

In addition, All-Stars Kyrie Irving, Kevin Love, John Wall and Chris Paul had to sit out playoff games.

The initiative is in partnership with General Electric Healthcare. It will be spearheaded by a 20-person strategic advisory board comprising team physicians and clinical researchers from various fields, including orthopedics, sports medicine, radiology and epidemiology.

"NBA players are among the best athletes in the world, and their well-being is the league's highest priority," NBA commissioner Adam Silver said in a statement released to ESPN.com. "Our support for medical research through our partnership with GE Healthcare will help us improve the long-term health and wellness of NBA players. We are also excited that this research collaboration will provide important insights to athletes at all levels."

Silver identified the need for such a program in late 2013 and has worked to assemble a team of respected physicians in coordination with NBA Associate Vice President David Weiss.

Dr. John DiFiori, the NBA director of sports medicine and a former president of the American Medical Society for Sports Medicine, will chair the new panel.

"It's a partnership that makes a lot of sense from a research standpoint," DiFiori told ESPN.com. "Our particular interest in research is that we're focused on musculoskeletal issues, such as hamstring pulls, torn ligaments, herniated disks. The overuse injuries -- soft-tissue injuries in particular -- are probably not getting the attention that they need to. They can evolve into significant impact on the players' careers. We want to make sure that is a big part of our advisory board and promote that as an area of active research."

Though the board will not perform the actual research as a unit, the goal is to identify and design research projects that will help keep athletes on the floor through improved detection protocols and treatment programs.

Among the many topics the advisory board could target for research, according to DiFiori, are schedule density, schedule length, and air travel and its resulting effect on injury rate. In the preseason, the NBA
experimented with a 44-minute game instead of the standard 48 minutes, sparking a larger conversation about the grind of the 82-game schedule. Cleveland Cavaliers forward LeBron James and Dallas Mavericks forward Dirk Nowitzki both advocated shortening the season but understood concerns over its effect on the business's bottom line would make it unlikely.

The NBA saw 578 back-to-backs on the 2014-15 schedule, up from 560 the previous season. There were 69 sets of four games in five nights on the schedule, which was six more than in 2013-14. The league has tried to cut down on back-to-backs in recent years after they peaked at 603 in 2009-10.

In June, Silver said the league was trying to decrease the number of back-to-backs and four-in-fives in the name of injury prevention.

"The injury data isn't showing that this was a worse year in terms of injuries than last year," he said. "Having said that, there are more high-profile players seemingly that are injured this year than last year. So that always concerns me. I think it's something that the league and the teams are spending enormous resources on for best-of-kind medical care, best-of-kind science to see what we can do to prolong players' careers and keep them on the floor longer."

The league's collaboration with GE also could study whether the NBA's new weeklong All-Star break has scientific basis for improving health and well-being of the players. The committee also will seek to address scheduling issues not just in the NBA but at the AAU and college levels. Youth sports, which have seen a rise in increased year-round single-sport focus, also will be investigated.

"One of the interests that the league has in terms of the NBA player is: What is the impact of scheduling?" DiFiori said. "How does a competitive schedule affect injury rate? What is the cumulative effect of all that training and competition on the NBA athlete?"

One particular area of interest, DiFiori said, is chronic tendinopathy, commonly known as tendinitis or "jumper's knee." DiFiori said he believes the advisory board can make headway to prevent such injuries with better technology, methodology and expertise.

"It's an overuse injury," he said. "Addressing the risk factors or how to prevent it, it's very difficult to treat. Imaging is very helpful beyond a standard MRI."

The NBA's collaboration with GE Healthcare is said to be unrelated to the NFL's 2013 decision to partner with GE to research concussions and its detection protocol.

The NBA advisory board is one of many steps the league has undertaken in health and science recently. It has strengthened its cardiac research program, which helped diagnose former Baylor star Isaiah Austin ahead of the 2014 draft with the genetic disorder Marfan syndrome, which affects the connective tissue in the heart.

In addition to the partnership with GE, the NBA also has recently launched a multidisciplinary sports science committee made up of trainers, doctors and sports scientists to study evidence-based best practices in the industry.

The injury prevention committee is believed to be the first partnership of its kind among the four major sports in North America.

In May, European football club Real Madrid partnered with Microsoft in a large technological agreement geared toward fan engagement. Also, USA Track & Field has partnered with St. Vincent Sports Performance since 2009 to better manage injuries among its athletes.