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Athlete's emotional health as vital as physical well-being

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At last year's World Congress of Sports, an instant survey of participants noted the growing concern about off-the-field problems with athletes and their effect on the fan base. But once noted, the discussion ended abruptly.

It may be time to look at this issue again, not only to protect the investments of the business community, but for the long-term health of the athlete.

It's not surprising that the world of professional sports has felt it better to ignore or even hide the emotional and behavioral issues surrounding elite athletes. Athletes are expected to be strong, and this includes being emotionally sturdy. If athletes can't hack it, then they don't belong under the spotlight. Anything related to negative emotions is considered weak.

While this appears to be true on the surface, we have been faced with a growing number of elite athletes wilting under the pressure of outsized expectations. What is the cost to a team whose players climb into the stands, or to the morale of a professional team that has a disgruntled athlete with a chip on his shoulder? Does a sponsor get a rebate from athletes if they are on the sidelines or otherwise devalued by ill-advised behavior and poor decision-making?

As with many other areas of our lives, we tend to avoid what's uncomfortable, whether it's the feelings we push under the rug or simply ignore, or the words we are afraid to say; whether it's something in ourselves and our behavior ... or in our neighbors and their behaviors. This is a fairly routine result of our childhood rearing, our culture, as well as natural reasons for turning away from discomfort.

Elite athletes have it much worse than the average person. With a natural-born ability for success, they have rarely had to develop other types of coping mechanisms, or even deal with frustration. The world tends to accommodate and forgive them. While they are so good at what they do, this doesn't make them immune to emotional slides, or the side effects of the great amount of pressure that come with success and expectations. They get wounded just like you and me. For them, however, this always happens under a spotlight or microscope. There is no timeout to recuperate and no safe place to lick their wounds. This fact has been intensified as athletes appear to "make it" at younger and younger ages, with even bigger expectations placed on them.

The result of this pressure cooker is what we are seeing in sports today: more and more athletes displaying behavior that is harmful to themselves and the sport they represent.

A constructive approach

What if we treated the mental and emotional part of sport just like the professionals treat the physical and performance part? When it comes to a swing or a kick, we break down the movement, identify what's ideal, and then help the athlete learn each component, and then put them all together. During a slump we examine their mechanics and identify the parts that need correcting.

When the emotional or behavioral subject is raised with sports teams there is always the feeling that even talking about it is taboo. I have had conversations with general managers who have said, "I don't know if we can get the athletes to pay attention." And I have spoken with coaches who have quietly said, "This must stay confidential," or "We can't make [the athlete] feel like there is something wrong with him."

Why not take the same approach to the athlete's mental focus and emotional "game" as we do the physical? Despite the fact that everyone agrees on the importance of the mental aspects of the game, it's only recently that this has received much attention. Furthermore, it's kept at arm's distance much of the time. Why should this be?

We have only to review the scientific research to know why this aspect of sports is so important. For example, research indicates that individuals who have low levels of social support combined with few coping skills take longer to recover from injury. Stress itself has been shown to slow the healing process. Similar results demonstrated that psychosocial factors also affect injury vulnerability.

Other performance-related behavioral factors include distractibility, the ability to focus, to fully participate in practice and to remember plays, and good decision-making on the field. And finally, it is clear that off-field distractions will interfere with on-field focus as well as team "chemistry."

What I am suggesting is that teams develop a continuing training program encompassing positive mental and emotional practices. We should bring these "skills" under the umbrella of training to eliminate any stigma and acknowledge their importance to the overall success of the team and the athlete. Such training, which I have developed after years of researching the stress and emotional needs of athletes, would incorporate issues of self-esteem and cognitive and emotional balance, as well as focus and concentration. This is the kind of positive and comprehensive framework needed as the foundation of overall performance.

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