Sports: A Double-Edged Sword

Competition has a darker side that's seldom discussed.

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Whether careers are brought to an end by the inevitable passing of time or an unforeseen injury, the effects on an athlete's mental health can be immediate and long-lasting. While top athletes are defined by a social identity that has everything to do with their physical abilities, those who experience difficulty meeting performance standards face a greater risk of developing mental disorders, according to a growing body of research about the issue.

What happens when athletes don't win or fail to achieve their personal goals? At some point, there comes a time to quit. In sports, all competitors face this simple fact of life—whether as a result of injury or eventually reaching an age when their bodies no longer respond to the commands of the brain.

"Elite athletes push their bodies to the limit, demonstrating our ultimate physical potential; their bodies are scrutinized and held to the highest performance standards," says Michelle Silver, PhD, an associate professor in the department of sociology at the University of Toronto Scarborough. "Yet when they retire, elite athletes are often cast aside, despite the tremendous potential they hold to offer insights about embodied processes and resilience."

Silver's study examined perspectives on aging, physical decline and physical engagement. She conducted interviews with retired Olympic athletes, coaches and masters athletes to delve into the often complex relationship between athletic identity and successful aging. Her inquiry also focused on how society views its athletes when they can no longer perform at their peak ability.

Some athletes face this reality much sooner than expected when injury strikes without warning. According to the Pro Athlete Law Group, a group of attorneys who represent current and former professional athletes in workers' compensation claims cases, almost 21,000 football injuries are reported among the colleges and universities of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) each year. Many of these accidents involve blows to the spine that can lead to permanent disabilities that end the careers of young men and women who dreamed of playing professional sports.

An NCAA handbook addresses student athletes' mental health issues following injury. In addition, researchers are studying early interventions to respond to the mental health needs of athletes at all levels.

Last year, the International Olympic Committee issued a consensus statement on the mental health of elite athletes. It included recommendations for the treatment of anxiety and mood disorders and eating and bipolar disorders.

The statement focused on managing individual athletes affected by mental illness. But its broader importance lies in recognizing that sports can contribute to some of the mental health difficulties experienced by athletes in competitive organized athletics.

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