

Losing yourself – Injuries and the athletic identity

Injuries suck. I think everyone can agree on that. But especially for competitive athletes, injuries are often times more than just a nuisance, that temporarily keeps them from doing something they like to do. Athletes often experience a downright emotional rollercoaster after having injured themselves and during the rehabilitation process. Anger, resentment, anxiety, confusion, shock, helplessness and pretty much everything in between can occur. I certainly can say for myself, that I have gone through almost everything on that list in the past six months following my finger injury. In the most extreme cases an athlete might even develop a full-blown depression or commit suicide. These events do have more than one cause, probably including many that have nothing to do whatsoever with the injury. Nevertheless, injuries are one of the biggest risk factors for suicide in athletes.

To an outsider, such a reaction may seem completely unreasonable, especially if the injury is something that seems to be rather insignificant in the grand scheme of things, like a strained muscle, a broken bone or a torn ligament. These might seem like an unfortunate annoyance but hardly reason for such an extreme psychological reaction. However, one must realize that an injury has the potential to be a traumatic experience for athletes. For example, these individuals often experience symptoms following the injury, comparable to what people experience after having been in a fire or a natural disaster. But why is that?

There is certainly a whole range of factors that contribute to the high stress potential of an injury, including but not limited to the loss of the social environment and one's daily structure as well as simply being unable to do something one loves. However, one central aspect is the identity threat that comes with being an injured athlete.

Usually, one's self-concept consists of a variety of different self-constructs. For example, I have a self-construct of myself as a psychology student, which is primarily important at the university or when I am studying. On the other hand, at home my role within the family might come more into focus. The extent to which a person identifies with the role of an athlete and uses it for the purpose of self-definition is called the athletic identity. In many competitive athletes, this is – unsurprisingly – very highly developed. Why else would someone spend all those hours grinding through long sessions, continue climbing with bloody hands and squeeze into shoes that are at least two sizes too small. In general, a strong athletic identity is not something negative or to be avoided, on the contrary, it can have a variety of positive effects such as higher self-esteem and (not surprisingly, I think) better performance. I don't think there was or ever will be a very high-level athlete that doesn't identify with the role of an athlete to a very substantial degree. However, an injury essentially eliminates that source of identity and the person is suddenly confronted with the question: "What am I without this sport?" Now, the crucial problem arises, if the role of an athlete is the only thing a person uses to define herself, because in this case the answer will be: "Nothing". From this perspective, it becomes obvious why injuries can evoke such strong psychological reactions that otherwise can appear to be completely out of proportion. If the sport is everything one has, life without it might not really seem worth living.

Now, the solution to this problem is not necessarily reducing one's identification as an athlete. That might be sensible or even required if the injury is career-ending or one resigns from (competitive) sports for other reasons. By the way, in such cases, a similar phenomenon can occur, meaning, that individuals who up to that point have only defined themselves as an athlete are at risk of running into psychological and emotional trouble. This demonstrates that simply devaluing the role of the

sport for one's life is not a particularly good idea, as long as one does not have anything else to draw his identity and self-worth from. Furthermore, in most cases the goal is to get back to being able to train and compete, thus the importance of the sport is not to be reduced generally. Therefore, the solution is not giving up one's identity as an athlete but creating additional sources from which to derive feelings of self-worth and identity. For example, during the past six months, while rehabilitating my finger injury, my university studies have helped me tremendously, as they gave me something aside from the injury to focus on, into which I was able to invest my time in and something to be proud of at the end of the day.

Part of the solution might already be shifting the focus away from the performance to the process of being an athlete. Often times, the real question – at least for competitive athletes - is not: "What am I without the sport?", but rather: "What am I without my abilities and achievements?" In most cases, people can still train somehow, even while injured. However, if feelings of identity and self-worth are only drawn from the actual performance, that's a small comfort. However, if being an athlete is defined as showing up for training, working hard and doing what needs to be done, an injury does not stand in the way of that all that much. And ironically, this very much increases the chances of returning to one's previous level of performance faster.

This question: "What am I without my ability to perform?" is one that, for competitive athletes, is not only relevant in the context of injury. The very same question arises during times in which training is not going so well, whenever a competition goes wrong and of course sooner or later when one ends his or her career. Therefore, in my opinion, it is absolutely essential for every athlete to have an answer to this question.

When I started competing, my youth coach once confronted me with this very same question (at least indirectly) and to be honest, back then I did not have an answer. I have always been someone who in nearly all aspects of life identifies in terms of my performance and the prospect of losing that was pretty scary. But over time I have learned to shift that focus. Three weeks before I injured my finger and immediately prior to the only two competition of the "Covid-Season" 2020, I tweaked something in my back and for a couple of days was not sure whether I would be able to start. In the six months leading up to that I had not missed a single day of training, I was stronger than ever before and suddenly I wasn't sure whether all of that might have been in vain. But I did not regret a single one of those days. And in that moment, I knew I had an answer. That does not mean I was not very much annoyed initially and quite relieved once it turned out I was able to compete after all. The same goes for the past six months, in which I had to deal with my finger injury. It has been anything but easy, but not because I felt like I needed to perform in order to be someone, but simply because I love climbing and being able to try hard and I simply missed that a lot.

An athlete should never define him or herself only in terms of achievement and performance. Making one's whole happiness, identity, and feelings of self worth dependent on what one is able to do physically, potentially even restricted to a couple of competitions a year is a recipe for disaster.