Adjusting to the End of an Athlete’s Career

Student-athletes sometimes need to end their sports careers prematurely due to injury, or simply move on to “the next step” after college – a step that is not usually related to continuing their sport. Regardless of why athletes have to adjust their lives, it can be a very difficult transition. Here are a few reasons why...

- Starting in freshman year, college athletes must face the change from high school to college sports. It often means that last year’s star is this year’s rookie. Athletes usually have to start all over to prove themselves and earn a spot on the team. It can be quite intimidating since college sports bring together the most talented high school athletes in the country. Even outstanding athletes may doubt their abilities.

- When young people define themselves mostly (if not entirely) as athletes, their self-worth is tied to their success on the field. If athletes feel they are not performing at their best, if there is a team losing streak, or if the athletes spend a lot of time on the bench, these factors may lead athletes to doubt their worth. This can make suicide seem like a way to escape the embarrassment. They may even feel death is deserved!

- Athletes who find themselves cut from the team or out of play due to an injury or completed eligibility may see these events as more than just the end of their sports career. So many of their relationships are built on being part of the team, traveling with the team and working as part of the team that they may have very limited personal identities outside the team.

The team may also be the only source of connection students have while they are away from home, and team status may be linked to their popularity. The team will move on without them but they may not be able to move forward alone. They may see the end of athletics as the end of life as they have always known it and choose not to rebuild – but to end things permanently through suicide.

- Physical injuries can often leave emotional scars. Athletes may wonder if they will ever fully recover. They may become depressed if they don’t see the immediate results of long hours of rehabilitation. They may also try to rehab so fast that they face additional physical pain. Prolonged physical pain can lead to depression, which – left untreated – can sometimes lead to suicidal thinking.
• Student-athletes have access to risky behaviors like drinking alcohol, drugs, and gambling. These behaviors are often linked to other mental health problems. Student-athletes do not generally seek professional mental health help. They may believe there is a stigma of weakness if they need to reach out or that someone will find out and it will effect their status with the team. Athletes may “buy into” the idea that they should be tough enough to handle their problems on their own, and that problems should be easily “ licked.”

○ Although student-athletes have accepted the responsibility of team membership and academic studies, it does not mean they are prepared for the level of stress and hard work that they will face.

To summarize, college students have not had the life experience of working through difficult times and learning that things almost always improve. They lack the insight to know that just as things may seem bad today, tomorrow may bring solutions.

• The cumulative effects of their physical, emotional and social pressures increase the risk of suicide in this population.

○ It is critical, especially at transition points like serious injury or the end of athletic careers, that coaches and other adults be aware of the stress, depression and lack of self-worth that athletes may experience – and guide them through these times.