

Psychology of sport injury
Psychosocial antecedents and consequences of sport injury

Implications for Coaching

As described in unit 3 of *Fundamentals of Coaching*, a successful teacher/coach must work to create an optimal coaching environment that will facilitate the basic psychological needs of the students. It is perhaps even more important to recognize this when a student is injured or returning to play following injury. Given the research that has shown the value of social support as a coping resource, teacher/coaches should strive to facilitate every student's sense of relatedness both to the staff and the team. One important aspect of this support relates to challenging more traditional sport injury attitudes.

Unhealthy Attitudes

In an attempt to develop successful competitors, many coaches have unwittingly fostered incorrect attitudes and beliefs in their students toward sport injury. Specifically the belief that athletes must be able to play through pain and be tough. Unfortunately coaches seldom take the time to explain to young athlete's the difference between pain that can be ignored and pain that needs to be addressed. This leads to a situation where the highly invested student, one who likely defines him/herself as an athlete, will endure increasing levels of pain that, although potentially making for a tough athlete, may lead to a situation where he/she never plays healthy. Perhaps more significantly, this pervasive belief may set the stage for a lifetime of suffering. Teacher/coaches have a responsibility to assist students in developing appropriate attitudes toward sport injury that will ensure healthy adaptation to pain both now and in the future.

A second attitude that is extremely damaging to students is the one concerning the value of the injured athlete. Some coaches are of the opinion that an injured athlete is, at best of no-value to the program now that they cannot perform or, at worst, a cancer that needs to be eliminated from the program either literally or figuratively. Both attitudes are wrong and inconsistent with the mission and purpose of interscholastic athletics. Injury is a part of sport and provides a teachable moment that can assist both the injured student and the team in understanding and dealing with adversity. It is vitally important that all teacher/coaches and athletic administrators internalize the belief that the mission and purpose of interscholastic athletics is to maximize each student

physical, social, personal and psychological development and that includes those that are currently injured or returning from injury.

Social support

As mentioned before, social support is critical both in terms of reducing the possibility of injury and in the rehabilitation process particularly with moderate to severe injuries. It is likely that for many students friendships and social interactions center on the team and team members. When a student is injured these important relationships may be ruptured. A teacher/coach needs to be sensitive to this change and look to reengage the injured student with the team as soon as possible. Although a student with a moderate or severe injury may not be able to participate in practice or play, he/she can assist the coaching and/or athletic training staff in meaningful ways that will enable him/her to remain connected to the program.

For seriously injured students, support groups for sharing and discussing concerns, fears, and difficulties may be helpful. In spite of such support both in and outside of the team, if a student is still experiencing negative mood states and a disinterest in activities and people including friends, professional counseling or therapy may be necessary.

Psychological Rehabilitation Strategies

Significant research and anecdotal evidence now exists that stresses the importance of the psychological component of the rehabilitation process. Although the day-to-day rehabilitation of a student is likely to be the responsibility of a sports medicine professional, a teacher/coach should encourage the injured student to use the mental skills discussed in unit 3 of *Fundamentals of Coaching* to assist in the injury recovery process.

- Goal setting – Research has shown that throughout the rehabilitation process it is most helpful for the injured student to be engaged in setting specific short and long term goals for recovery, return to practice and competition, and day-to-day rehabilitation that include time, place and activities (DePalma & DePalma, 1989).
- Confidence – It is normal for a student to experience doubts and even reduced self-esteem following injury and during the rehabilitation process. Reductions in self-esteem are most likely to occur for the student who identifies his/herself as an athlete and bases his/her self-worth on his/her athletic ability and accomplishments. It is critically important that the rehabilitation environment and process be structured to optimize the injured student's self-confidence and self-esteem. Approaching the rehabilitation process in much the same way as teaching a new technique or tactic (i.e., breaking a task into manageable chunks, accumulating progressively more demanding accomplishments) should increase the probability of initial success and consequent increases in self-confidence.

Summary

The welfare of the student is at the core of the interscholastic athletic experience which emphasizes the need for the teacher/coach to be proactive in creating an environment that promotes the value of each participant. The recognition of the psychosocial antecedents and consequences of sport injury are clearly important pieces of knowledge that all interscholastic teacher/coaches should possess as they represent an important aspect of any comprehensive sport safety program.

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