



THE INSTITUTE OF  
**SPORTS**  
PSYCHOLOGY

## **Fear of Re-injury in Recovery: Finding A New Way Back**

*By Robert Andrews, MA, LMFT, CSC*

For many athletes coming back from a serious sports related injury is a terrifying ordeal. They have been cleared to play physically, but their fear of suffering another injury can be debilitating. These fears can cause complications with their return to play. Many suffer from confusion, anxiety, anger, shame and guilt. If they have been cleared to play then why do they feel so bad? Many feel that something is wrong with them if they can't come back confident and in a good frame of mind.

I was talking with a soccer player and one of their parents about a teammate who suffered a strained ACL. The injured athlete took time off for the injury to heal. When they returned to play they were terrified. They were afraid of injuring their knee again and played with anxiety, fear, and apprehension. They did not play all out and their hesitancy was apparent. It grew worse with each game. As their anxiety and fear grew they became more emotional during the games. It was apparent to everyone watching that something was wrong.

I began to get excited at the thought of helping this athlete overcome their sports injury trauma. As I reached for a business card for the parent of the struggling athlete I was told that during their last game the athlete had torn their ACL completely. The field was in really bad condition and their fear of re-injury was amplified. They were crying while trying to play soccer. They ended up in a fight for the ball and injured their knee. I felt my heart sink when they told me this part of the story.

### **Too Many Sad Stories**

I was on the sidelines of a football game watching a running back who had torn his ACL the year before. He was hesitating as he ran and favoring the injured knee. After the game I told his coach that he was going to suffer an ACL injury to the other knee if he didn't get some help with the trauma from the first injury. The next week he tore his other ACL.

I was watching a game on television and I observed hesitation and apprehension in an offensive lineman who had injured his left knee the year before. I turned the game off at half time. A few days later I called his athletic trainer and mentioned to him that I believed that this lineman was heading towards an injury on his other knee. He asked me why I felt this way. I told him what I observed watching the game. He said that was interesting and that the lineman had torn his other ACL in the fourth quarter of that game.

### **Is the Wrong Message Being Sent?**

An athlete I helped overcome a horrific injury was interviewed about his "miracle comeback". When they asked this athlete what they did to make such a profound come back they said they just had a "really strong attitude and mind set". They didn't mention all the hard work they did mentally and emotionally to overcome the trauma they suffered while injured and unable to compete. I believe this athlete did a disservice to other athletes who are trying to overcome the trauma and the mental and emotional blocks that stand in the way of a full "100%" recovery. They sent a message to other injured athletes that all you have to do is have a strong mindset and everything will be o.k.

This message can have a profoundly negative impact on the athlete who is struggling to get back mentally and emotionally. It can create doubt and confusion, and erode self confidence. Many athletes never find their way back from injury because they can't overcome this cauldron of powerful emotions.

### **The New Way Back**

I was watching a game on TV recently. An athlete I helped overcome a serious injury was having a great game. It was apparent that they were confident, in command, and had no fear of re-injury. The commentator said it was apparent that this athlete was back physically, but that they were back mentally too. My wife asked me to replay his comment. We listened to it again and she said "someone gets it". This commentator could see from the way this athlete was playing that they have experienced a complete psychological recovery from their injury too.

I wish I could have helped the young soccer player before they suffered a completely torn ACL. I wish I could help every injured athlete. Treating the traumatic nature of sports related injuries puts the athlete back in charge and rids them of fear, anxiety, apprehension, depression and self doubt. They return to play mentally stronger and tougher. Not only does their attitude and outlook get better, they come back wiser and more mature. This wisdom and maturity permeates all areas of their lives. They learn a lot in the process of coming back.



The Institute's founder and director Robert B. Andrews MA, is a certified sports counselor, and licensed therapist. Robert has woven his passion for sports and experience as an athlete, together with 18 years of experience in personal empowerment. He has created a dynamic facility for athletes desiring to break through performance ceilings, and maximize their athletic potential.

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