



THE INSTITUTE OF  
**SPORTS**  
PSYCHOLOGY

## Sports Injuries and Shame - What's Wrong With the Athlete Who Needs Help?

*By Robert Andrews, MA, LMFT, CSC*

I frequently receive emails and phone calls from athletes or their parents inquiring about treatment for sports injuries. These athletes have suffered numerous sports related injuries. Some of these athletes have suffered other complications during their recovery. Many suffered a serious injury and then several other injuries trying to come back. Many are contemplating giving up their respective sport.

I always explain to the athlete or their parent how these injuries affect the athlete on a conscious and unconscious level and how they can be helped. Most of the time I get to work with the athlete and experience the joy of seeing them work through the traumatic nature of their injury. They bounce back in a profound way. The athlete, their family members, coaches, and trainers are elated.

Every now and then an athlete or parent just kind of disappears and never returns phone calls or emails once we have the initial consultation. Sadly I don't get the opportunity to help these athletes. The reasons...money, time, "we are going to see how he/she does for a while", "not sure we want to go that route" and so on. It is always sad and disappointing when I am not given the opportunity to help these types of athletes. I always ask myself "how bad does it have to get for these kids?"

Money is certainly a very legitimate reason—especially in our tough economic times—and I want to address another underlying reason that I see standing in the way of treatment and having a negative influence on sports injury recovery.

### Sports Injuries in The News

Over the last few weeks there have been many sports related injuries in the news. Locally rookie Ben Tate and Conner Barwin of the Texans went down with season ending ankle injuries:

- Case Keenum of the University of Houston, a Heisman hopeful, suffered a concussion one week, and the following week suffered a season ending ACL injury
- Anthony Rendon of Rice University, the College Baseball Player of the Year, broke his ankle playing for team USA—this after suffering a season ending injury on the same ankle last year



I read about a high school football player from the Houston area who broke his neck in a game. He sat on the side lines for forty-five minutes before anybody realized that he had a broken neck. He was centimeters away from being permanently paralyzed.

Reggie Bush under incredible stress, embarrassment, and humiliation gives up the Heisman Trophy he won in 2005 because of his issues while at USC. The next week he breaks his leg. There are numerous research studies that show a very clear connection between increased levels of stress and pressure from outside distractions and an increase in sports related injuries.

Kevin Kolb, a University of Houston ex suffers a concussion while playing for the Philadelphia Eagles and loses his starting spot to Michael Vick. The media hounded Kevin for his play and made Vick sound like the savior of Eagles football.



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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***Creating Breakthroughs with Athletic Performance and Sports Injury Trauma***

If you read between the lines I believe you will hear and feel the powerful psychological impact all of these athletes experienced when suffering an injury. They all have to deal with stressful issues related to and not related to sports—all this while trying to return to play and make a comeback.

All of these athletes will have to take time off to recover. Some will need surgery and rehab. The lucky ones will be able to come back. The football player in the neck brace who came so close to permanent paralysis suffered a career ending and life changing injury. Case Keenum's future is in doubt because of his injuries.

I read that Owen Daniel, the Texans tight end who was coming back from a torn ACL suffered last season was so nervous before his first game back that he was shaking during warm ups. Some of that shaking could have been from healthy excitement about his return to professional football. But my training tells me that consciously or unconsciously he was terrified and wondered how his knee would hold up. Fear of re-injury is a huge obstacle to overcome when athletes first step back on the field.

Sometimes I get very frustrated when I get emails like those I mentioned and I am not given the opportunity to help these athletes. The frustration comes from not being able to help these kids when they were first injured. I also feel sad that it has taken this much pain and suffering before mental and emotional support and assistance is considered.



### **The Psychological Impact Becomes Cumulative**

The mental and emotional trauma builds up one injury on top of the other. For some the sense of overwhelm is so powerful the kid says "I am done". Many go out and experience another injury. All play and attempt to hide the fear, anxiety, and sense of overwhelm. So what keeps athletes, parents, coaches, and trainers from getting athletes the help they need to overcome the mental and emotional impact of their injuries? What I hear most often is money. In our economy financial struggles are very real.

### **Could There Be Another Reason?**

The answer is yes. Shame!—a belief that something is wrong with an athlete who needs help to overcome their injury related trauma. This shame is also experienced by many parents of athletes if their son or daughter are injured and need help. It carries a negative stigma and is seen as a sign of weakness and a reflection on the athlete and those in his/her system.

When I was in high school I suffered a concussion, separated my shoulder, broke my arm and suffered a severe knee injury where I tore three of the four knee ligaments and a cartilage. In college I separated my shoulder again. With each injury I moved farther and farther away from a confident, outgoing, fun seeking kid, and closer and closer to a less confident, anxiety filled, pain avoiding athlete trying to act like everything was fine, but terrified of being injured again. It had a very dramatic impact on my personality.

Sometimes I get frustrated at not being able to help an athlete. Either they don't want to come in, or coaches, parents and trainers fail to take what I see is critical action to help an athlete get the help they need.

I know that I have to do a better job of educating parents, coaches, athletes, doctors, and trainers. My mission is to help these athletes overcome the psychological impact of their injuries. To make this happen I have to continue to educate and do my part to shift this paradigm.

There is good news on my end. I work with USA Gymnastics, many NFL and Major League baseball players, Olympic gymnasts and track & field athletes, USA judo and weightlifting athletes, and high school and college athletes from all across the country. This treatment model is working its way into these systems.



With each athlete I work with I know there is one more athlete, teammate, parent, family, coach, doctor, and trainer that has expanded their knowledge and awareness of the psychological impact of sports related injuries. They see how beneficial treatment can be for the athlete and those in the athletes system.