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## **TRAUMA and EMOTIONAL STRESS in CONTACT SPORTS:**

### **Psychological Costs and Motivations**

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Academic researchers, professionals and the general media are paying increased attention to issues of trauma, depression, head injury and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder – and the associated human costs. Recent high-profile tragedies in the athletic community, in active-duty and veteran military personnel and within the entertainment industry, as well as horrendous public acts of violence, have focused concern upon these issues. As recently as May 13, 2013, an article in the Washington Post cited a study that 90% of former NFL players report suffering chronic, debilitating, daily pain.

Verifiable data and anecdotal experiences are accumulating regarding the interconnectedness of trauma (in general), head injury, other physical injury, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, depression and emotional and behavioral dysregulation. Medical, mental health, legal and sports personnel and institutions are struggling to address issues regarding treatment and prevention.

The physiological effects of trauma are inordinately complex and interact on all scales of observation; extending from the “macro” level of gait (and even paralysis) to the

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functional level of cognition and mood to the microscopic level of cellular changes. Beyond damage that can be done to the brain by physical trauma, “new evidence reveals that childhood trauma may throw off-kilter the hardware responsible for the brain’s response to stress...”<sup>2</sup> Gustavo Turecki, director of the McGill Group for Suicide Studies has been quoted, “It is a known fact that individuals with early life adversity are at a higher risk of suicide... The message that you’re getting is that the environment is hostile. You’re being abused by people you’re supposed to trust... the message you’re getting is the world is one in which you can’t trust anyone you’re always on alert.”<sup>3</sup> There is good reason to believe that repetitive trauma later in life has a similar effect. Research suggests that severe stress can disturb the blood-brain barrier that protects the brain from drugs and other chemicals that enter the circulatory system, “These findings suggest that peripherally acting drugs administered under stress may reach the brain and affect centrally controlled functions...”<sup>4</sup> This would include the perhaps unpredictable effects of prescribed medications, over-the-counter agents, illicit drugs and endogenous chemical agents.

My area of interest is on the emotional and interpersonal costs of trauma and injury – and the motivations that drive athletes to accept those risks.

Each person will react differently to trauma, illness or injury based upon their unique personality traits and past experiences.<sup>5</sup> While the athletic community certainly is not monolithic regarding character and personality, there is a self-selection process wherein persons with certain personality traits and/or vulnerabilities will rarely progress to higher levels of competition. This self-selection has both positive and negative aspects. Lacking motivation, drive, confidence, persistence and some degree of accepting risk and discomfort/pain, competitive success is unlikely. At the same time, excessive risk-taking, over-confidence, grandiosity and/or dissociation of pain can be dangerous – the invulnerable feelings of youth only apply to real life for the extremely lucky, or the fictional.

Any athletic pursuit (even if not competitive) involves a risk of injury, but obviously, risks differ greatly between different endeavors. After a brief outline describing levels of risk, I will focus on the endeavors that carry greater danger to emotional well being and interpersonal stability – and probably reflect underlying dysfunction leading to the motivation to participate in those activities.

### **Accidents Happen**

Injuries will occur even in non-violent, non-contact sports. However, those injuries rarely involve interpersonal trauma. There can still be a significant emotional impact upon either an amateur or professional who loses the ability to compete for an extended period

of time (or permanently), but this is not the area where we are seeing the epidemic of stress-related problems.

### **Aggressive Play**

Some sports only intermittently involve physical contact. “Aggressive play” only occurs in specific circumstances while during the most of the competition, the athlete does not have to be particularly concerned or wary (e.g., baseball). Severe injuries can and do occur, including some that are inflicted by participants with less-than-optimal sportsmanship, an indifferent attitude toward the well-being of their competitor or even malicious intent. However, violent contact is not the focus of competitive relationships and participation in these sports is unlikely to generate a consistent level of “stress” and vigilance, and therefore, there is less risk of inducing emotional trauma.

### **Aggressive Play / Mutual Dependence**

More complex emotional reactions occur during athletic endeavors in which violent contact is not inherent but aggressive interactions occur while at the same time, the competitors are mutually dependent upon each other for their safety (e.g., horse racing, car racing, etc.). These are competitions in which there is a *constant risk* of danger; accidents can and do happen; intense “action” is expected and constitutes “part of the game” – but within these competitions, poor judgment, lack of skill, foolhardy aggressiveness or excessive risk taking put multiple participants at severe risk.

In this situation, the relationships between the competitors include an intricate and difficult balance between camaraderie and rivalry. There exists a large grey area between dangerous aggression and uncompetitive timidity. Differences in attitude, skill and risk-taking may create problems in relationships between competitors, which can, in turn, increase danger on the field of play. While most of the participants will accept the inherent risks and maintain a cordial if not friendly relationship outside of competition, distrust and hostility occur – between individuals, between “cliques”, between teams and within teams. Additionally, the *consistency* of the risk at all times leads to a heightened level of awareness, vigilance and in the extreme, distrust and/or anger. Competitors may have difficulty “turning off” this level of stress and vigilance when not on the field of play; retirement – whether natural or “forced” by injury or loss of skill – can lead to difficulty coping with “normal” life. At the same time, on a less conscious level, there can be a sense of loneliness and loss of the actual *interpersonal closeness* derived from the consistent mutual dependence upon peers for safety. Over-aggressiveness, regressive timidity, “living in the past”, entering problematic relationships and sexual activities, and/or seeking to regain the “rush” through other

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risk-taking behaviors or turning to alcohol or illicit drugs are not uncommon responses. More mature and productive athletes go on to other endeavors or stay within their field of completion, but in a different role (a jockey may become a trainer; a race car driver may become an owner; athletes moving from competitors to working with the media; etc.) However, some will have difficulty coping with a reduced level of “thrill” and vigilance, and may descend into depression and both personal and interpersonal behavioral dysfunction.

### Inherent Violent Contact

Sports which inherently involve violent contact exponentially increase the risks I have just described. The elevated level of psychological danger is a function of the impact upon (conscious and unconscious) emotions and personality traits of the more intense nature of the competition, the higher level of vigilance required, the constant presence of immediate risk to career, health and even life. Additionally, diminished and less effective coping mechanisms that often arise as a result of physiological injuries that invariably occur over time – injuries that may impact cognitive functioning, impulse control, body image and sense of identity. It is important not to underestimate the threat to self-esteem and the sense of identity that a person experiences if they lose even a small percentage of their cognitive abilities or physical prowess. The consistent presence of danger – acknowledged or unacknowledged – can induce a clinical or subclinical Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Additionally, the career “life-span” within these sports is usually shorter, so that athletes typically must adapt to a major life change at a younger age. **Yet frequently, those who excel at these sports, from an early age, are “trained”, encouraged and reinforced in the ability to tolerate pain, deny risk, act aggressively with compartmentalization (or total denial) of compassion and “not to look beyond today’s game.” At times to a significant extent, this interferes with normal progression into realistic adult maturity – in planning for the future, caring for oneself and relating to others.** Unfortunately, there is frequently external support and fortification for what is actually an unrealistically grandiose and short-sighted view of self and life in general. **At the same time, this immature and potentially dangerous misunderstanding of life can develop spontaneously in individuals who have suffered childhood trauma. Thus, for a significant percentage of these athletes, the circumstances of their training reinforce dysfunctional defenses that have arisen in response to abuse and trauma, exacerbating their pathology and attendant risks. Yet those youth who are already on this course due to early life experiences will be unconsciously (or even at times consciously) attracted to these pursuits which reinforce defenses already in action; and if talented enough, these individuals offer “easy targets” for adults who use institutions of athletic competition to exploit youth for their own personal psychological and/or monetary gain. The net outcome of this scenario is youth (and then young adults) using the**

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**venue of athletic competition to unconsciously act out unresolved issues related to childhood trauma and abuse – often in a manner that is counter-therapeutic and not all that infrequently, becomes psychologically and/or physically quite dangerous.**

**Inherent Violent Contact / Mutual Dependence**

As I had discussed in a presentation to IPA two years ago, a unique “twist” and intensification of the issues and dynamics discussed occurs in athletic pursuits such as Professional Wrestling, wherein violent contact is obviously inherent to the “action” and there is intentional infliction of pain and “minor” injury – but there is also a clear responsibility and motivation to protect the opponent from significant harm, along with the expectation that the opponent also will be providing adequate protection, even while causing “minor” injury – and significant discomfort. There is no argument that Professional Wrestling does not involve “competition” vis-à-vis the outcome of specific matches, but there is nothing “fake” regarding the intense physical contact, frequent “minor” injury, significant chronic pain and constant risk of severe injury – as well as a very real and significant competition to “make it to the top” among other “workers.” Securing a place within a promotion occurs by exhibiting physical talent as well as having the ability to protect other individuals within the company from serious injury. The difference between being a top-level performer and in the “minor leagues” is tremendous, with only a small percentage of these athletes being able support themselves by wrestling alone, while the highest echelon may earn seven-figure incomes.

**Perhaps more than any other athletic endeavor or sport, Professional Wrestling recapitulates issues of childhood adversity and trauma – both for the fans and for the competitors. As opposed to the pure aggression and violence displayed in boxing or MMA (or at times in football), or the rather impersonal violence that occurs in team sports, professional wrestlers *are harming* each other – but “for your own good” and without intent to cause “serious” injury. Usually on a deeply unconscious level, this is an enactment of the relationship of a child to a harshly disciplining parental figure – or in the (unfortunately not uncommon) situation, an abusive parent.**

Thus, the emotional demands of this activity can have an even more profound impact upon the individual than the physical toll – which itself is heavy. If the participant is not aware on some level of the paradoxical nature of the required behaviors; if the participant is not able to effectively maintain appropriate boundaries between fictional “storylines” and their real life; the risk of personal dysfunction is extremely high.

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While Professional Wrestling represents the “purest culture” of this very intense and personal psychological dynamic, the same internal experience and processes can be seen to be interwoven into essentially all sports which involve the need to “tolerate pain” “for the good of the team” or for personal success – and it can be seen that this clearly mirrors military training. Especially for individuals who come from dysfunctional backgrounds, while athletic competition can be an effective outlet for pent-up emotions, at the same time, very problematic emotions may arise that can cause intense psychological distress to individuals, within their personal relationships and to friends and family. These emotions can also amplify the obstacles to achieving stability and maturity in adult life.

The manner in which many athletic competitions trigger unresolved emotions related to childhood “traumas” is perhaps the most over-looked and least-well understood aspect of the risks and dangers of modern athletic completion.

### Protection of Athletes

It would seem to be a matter of common sense that athletic competitors would be less vulnerable to depression and tragedy if training regarding safety on the field of play and coping with “life outside of the game” began from the earliest years. Certainly, it cannot be expected that young, talented athletes will view themselves in a mature and objective manner, or that they will have the strength to turn away from risky behaviors that promise short-term gains. As long as young people compete, they will be “looking for the edge” to make it to the top; and they will disdain any concern about the future that may in any manner reduce current performance – it’s a matter of human nature. A recent study found that when asked, “If there was an illegal drug that you could use that would a) guarantee improved performance; b) be totally undetectable; and c) take ten years off of your life” – 65% of collegiate athletes responded that they would use the drug. **Advice, education and the imposition of external limits (regarding both safety and sportsmanship) are essential.** Yet it is equally a matter of common sense that there are powerful forces of greed, vicarious “pride” (in a team, in an individual) and public adulation that will consistently act to undermine the best long-term interests of the athlete; and that the dynamics related to childhood trauma and abuse is likely to continue to dominate many aspects of society – including politics and sports – for the foreseeable future.

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