

LONG-TERM INJURY: Thinking your way through the adjustment process

by Frank Young Ph.D. and Jerry Rose Ph.D.¹[1]

Imagine this scenario:

You've been a runner (skier, racquet sports player, mountain climber, or any other athlete) for most of your adult life. Running (substitute your major sport here) is a major part of your life, athletically, socially, psychologically, and even spiritually. Your spare time is spent training, running several kilometres per day, one marathon and 5 or more major races per year. Your social life often revolves around your running partners at the fitness club and your shared social circles. Even the other sports you do are evaluated in terms of their contribution to your fitness level and ability to ultimately run better.

Then one day it finally happens. It might be a single major injury, but more likely it is a series of wear and tear injuries of chronic overuse, ignoring or postponing the pain, until finally you lose the ability to function in your sport. You consult your physicians, physiotherapists, and trainers. They all

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agree to some extent: your days of high performance in this sport are over. You will have to change and take up something less physically demanding. At this point a major crisis occurs in your balance of values, meaning, and identity.

You have had chances to prepare for this moment. Earlier, when you had short-term injuries, you had to think through the healing process. You had to break through denial to acknowledge the injury, and understand the emotions involved as you made the necessary shifts in relationships and self-image. In an earlier article we emphasized the role of coping strategies such as shifting the expectation gradient, allowing and receiving the support of others, trusting the healing process, and using positive self-talk and healing imagery. We also outlined the value of getting the message of the injury, and shifting your perspectives about balance and meaning and relationships. All of these lessons are even more vitally important as we look at the adjustments necessary to successfully negotiate the aftermath of what we call “a career-ending injury.”

1. **Defining long-term or career-ending injury.**

Our object in looking at injury response is setting a pattern that could prevent long-term damage to the entire person and establish positive fitness to allow sport participation for a lifetime. In this article we are defining long-term or sport career-ending injury as physical damage that inhibits or prevents full participation in a sport or activity beyond 6 months, so that the recovery or rehabilitation may involve seasons or years of restriction from full participation in the favorite sport. We are also including chronic soreness if it escalates into episodes of acute pain or loss of function, basically, when the pain and weakness are such that the activity is no longer fun to do. We are not talking about an injury that ends an occupational career, such as police or firefighting. The scope of this article is focused on sports or avocational activities.

2. Emotional factors in injury.

“Well Doc, what do you think? How soon will I be able to play squash again?”

The orthopedic surgeon answers gently, “Uh, let me put it this way: have you ever thought of taking up fishing?”

As with short-term injury, the most common feature in the early stages of adjustment is denial. Typically, you want to get back into your favorite sport as soon as possible, underestimating the time of recovery, knowing but underplaying the risk of further tearing of already weakened tissue. Even when the diagnosis is major damage requiring months of rehab, or knowing that further play of that sport will wear down whatever is left of an injured knee or back, you cannot resist pushing the limits. That aggressive attitude to obstacles and challenges is part of what made you compete and excel in the first place. However, at this point that very stance of narrow determination will often work against the recovery of health and happiness.

Usually, there is a series of attempted “comebacks” as you ignore injuries (particularly chronic overuse injuries) and try to exercise through them. Reasons for this include goal-driven concerns, such as fear of losing fitness gains, competitive exposure or placement opportunities missed, prevention of goal attainment if they stop playing for a while, especially at crucial stages of your competitive career or season. Another concern for many people, men and especially women, is the intense fear of weight gain and changes in body shape that could accompany detraining. Stress regarding body image is considerable in this regard, especially if the athlete dislikes exercising other than doing their sport.

Furthermore, stopping training can be quite stressful, especially if the athlete relied overly heavily on that sport for stress management. How often have you heard a friend say, “I don’t have to meditate. Running is my meditation!” The sport can also be an exercise addiction. Many athletes have the compulsive need for the activity to generate endorphins and relieve stress. If they have not developed alternative mental activities and coping strategies for stress management, then the distress of the injury and its disruptions propel the athlete to return to sport prematurely to restore the addictive release the sport provides.

Beyond these obvious concerns are some perhaps more unconscious but nonetheless powerful mental factors leading athletes to ignore injuries. Many people try to maintain their self-concept as invulnerable, not subject to weakness, not allowing for the possibility of dependency, even if temporary or appropriate. They might also want to avoid feedback that could limit their freedom or threaten their sense of identity or autonomy, such as past experience with health practitioners advising them to curtail their favorite sport. The prospect of shifting to a new sport or activity is felt to be too boring or limiting, so athletes they keep training in their sport as long as they can. They are hoping to postpone or avoid altogether the looming identity crisis that will occur when they are deprived of the favorite mode of recreational and personal self-definition.

When that moment comes, the lifetime of accumulated emotions often break through surprisingly strongly. On the negative side are often: anger, frustration, fear, anxiety, guilt, social isolation from the team or sport group, feeling a loss of status or belonging with the group, or a loss of personal identity because they are no longer a valid competitor. Furthermore, this disappointment and depression can lead to social withdrawal and decreased motivation for all activities, including treatment for the injury.

Thankfully, not all emotion associated with injury is negative. A shift in paradigms of meaning is the key to self-acceptance that can generate positive emotions following a career-ending injury. Among the positive emotional experiences could be relief from the pressure of performance in training and competition, and eventually, group or team membership with more personal rather than performance-based acceptance. A feeling of peace and calm inner satisfaction can accompany learning about oneself and one's body-mind, and the freshness of developing new friendships and resources.

A career-ending injury is usually quite disruptive of the lifestyle of the athlete and his immediate social network. Functions and capacities can be compromised, and often the marital partner or other family members are frequently faced with a formerly absent athlete member who could be depressed or irritable, and is often less capable than his/her usual self. On the other hand, the athlete might actually take advantage of the opportunity to be more involved with family and friends in new and more flexible ways. There are now possibilities to restore balance in relationships where the athlete may have formerly seemed like an over-achieving but emotionally distant person. Transactions around receiving help and nurturance, accepting dependency without embarrassment or shame, and learning lessons of dignity and honor can often prevail in the exchanges of caring that accompany the healing process. Family and friends will also benefit when the athlete makes the crucial paradigm shift to self-acceptance in adjusting views about the meaning of sport in life.

3. Coping mechanisms.

Successful adjustment after career-ending injury is dependent on a number of mental factors. The main aspect is the focus on a positive mental outlook, cognitively reframing life's experiences, looking for the benefits and opportunities for learning and growth in every challenge. The main challenge is the choice to remain partly involved with your former sport, to leave the sport environment altogether, or to find a balance as you transition to new modes of sport participation.

Having to discontinue your favorite sport requires giving up and **relinquishing whatever goals in the sport were unmet at the time of stopping.** It is difficult to grieve unmet goals. This is especially true for an athlete forced by injury to retire at age 20 to 30, knocking out the potential for provincial, national and international achievement in the sport. For elite athletes there is a loss of potential fame and fortune from endorsements and business opportunities. It is also hard for a masters level athlete, losing the possibility of a number of personal bests, except with the increasing narrow limitations that the injury demands. But now to leave the sport altogether seems crushing. Yes, there are opportunities for coaching, officiating, and administrating to stay involved with the people in the sport, but what a seeming limitation compared to being a participant! For some people, limited or vicarious participation is not satisfying enough. They leave the sport altogether. However, they lose the social identity, friendships, network connections, and aesthetics of frequently observing that sport. On the other hand, if they make a transition to a new activity or life interest, they may experience a freshness and rejuvenation not possible if they remained on the periphery of their old sport. Remaining involved with your old sport infrastructure takes time and energy that could be reinvested in new horizons of activity and interest.

One very important aspect of taking up a new sport is the trajectory of performance on the learning curve. Look at it this way: if you have been doing your main sport for a number of years, how can your real external performance improve? Learnings based on increased experience and technical and strategic skill are often offset by slower speed and reaction times, decreased strength and power, and diminished opportunities (due to recovery time) to train as you did at age 20-30. The result is often flat performance, with minimal gains for large amounts of training time. There is less fun involved, because you are often compelled to see your present performance through the lenses of your former accomplishments. Even with the acceptance of time and aging, it is difficult to sustain freshness and a feeling of personal development.

Consider instead the benefits of starting a new sport or activity. You are on a new learning curve, with the steepness, challenge, rapid progress, and increasing skill development that make learning thrilling. Also, you have the benefit of similar generalized skills and disciplined attitudes from training in

your former sport. Admittedly, you will seldom match those who started your new sport as a junior, but their curves are gradually flattening, while your curve is steadily gaining. The perception of growth and development is a key element in enjoyment of an activity. Starting a fresh activity or sport provides you this expansion of new learning and corresponding enjoyment of life.

Instead of totally abandoning the old sport to make room for the new one, many people make the transition by balancing both options. That is, they stay administratively involved with their old sport in a time-limited way, while increasingly investing their energy in new fields of interest. We believe that this choice is optimal for maintaining stability and depth while adding freshness and openness to discovery in life's journey.

The third factor in the adjustment of transition involves the **daily practice of positive self-imagery skills**. Instead of only focusing on technical skills in the new sport, you can imagine and practice how the new activity is not compromised as badly by the injury, bypassing former obstacles. Imagery would also involve desensitization of the anxiety associated with the situation or actions that occurred when the injury happened, so that there is no avoidance or performance reluctance in new situations in your new sport.

Imagery is especially important in prevention or diminishment of stress reactions in advance of a career-ending injury. For example, you can run scenarios of how you would function in new sports and activities, how your life would be with new free time for a wider range of social and recreational interests. You can imagine development of different parts of yourself as a person, and different ways of defining yourself and your connection with others, including your spirituality. Correspondingly, developing a daily non-exercise meditative practice will diminish your dependency on your favorite sport for stress reduction and endorphin production. The time to learn and practice prevention is now, rather than after an injury occurs.

The fourth and most important factor in the successful transition to a life beyond a career-ending injury has to do with issues of value, meaning, personal philosophy, and spirituality. As we progress from junior to senior, senior to master, and beyond master levels of participation in sport, the guideposts become increasingly internal in our life journey. The rewards for addressing these phases of development are increasingly deep and satisfying. As with all fields of endeavor, it is helpful to enrich the eternal present by integrating the past and doing preparation exercises to anticipate the future. This topic is so important that we will be dedicating our next article to developing this new paradigm of thinking. This is the last of the trilogy beyond recovery from injury: **Sport and Spirituality**.

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