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Overtraining and Burnout: The Hidden Toll of Professional Sports on Athlete Health

Alicja Grzelak

Medical University of Lodz, al. Tadeusza Kościuszki 4, 90-419 Łódź

alagrzelak7@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0009-0009-6951-6113>

Sara Langner

Central Teaching Hospital of the Medical University of Lodz, Pomorska 251, 92-213 Łódź

sanilla.langner@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0009-0009-4306-4024>

ABSTRACT

Introduction: Professional sports demand exceptional physical and mental dedication, yet the intensive training and competitive pressures can often lead to overtraining and burnout among athletes. These phenomena not only compromise athletic performance but also pose significant

risks to long-term physical and mental health, raising concerns within the sports and medical communities.

Purpose of Work: This study explores the hidden toll of overtraining and burnout on professional athletes, examining their effects on physical health, psychological well-being, and career longevity. It aims to highlight underlying causes, consequences, and strategies for prevention and intervention.

State of Knowledge: Existing research identifies overtraining syndrome as a key contributor to chronic fatigue, decreased performance, and vulnerability to injury. Burnout, often stemming from emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, is linked to anxiety, depression, and withdrawal from sports. Despite growing awareness, gaps remain in comprehensive strategies to mitigate these challenges, particularly in integrating mental health support within training programs.

Material and methods: The study utilized a systematic review approach, searching across well-known academic databases like PubMed and Google Scholar, and then carefully screening the results to select pertinent studies for detailed examination.

Summary: This paper synthesizes the current research on overtraining and burnout, outlining the challenges faced by athletes and the common physical and mental health issues they confront. The findings underscore the need for proactive interventions, such as customized training schedules, psychological support, and comprehensive education programs for both athletes and coaches.

Keywords: burnout; overtraining; athlete; mental health; athletic injuries

INTRODUCTION

Professional sports involve intense physical demands and fierce competition, leading athletes to consistently push themselves to the limit in pursuit of excellence. For some, this pursuit manifests as long training hours, high-pressure competitions, and increased expectations from coaches, sponsors, and fans. While professional sports generate significant economic benefits and inspire millions globally, they also expose athletes to substantial physical and psychological health risks [\[1\]](#).

The study of the negative health impacts experienced by professional athletes has gained prominence as the incidence of injuries, mental health disorders, and career-ending complications rises. Research indicates that chronic conditions such as osteoarthritis, persistent concussions, and psychological disorders may persist long after an athlete's active career [\[2\]](#). Moreover, the obsession with attaining and sustaining peak physical condition can lead to overtraining, further exacerbating both physical and mental health issues.

This paper aims to examine and analyze relevant literature regarding the negative impacts on athlete health, encompassing both physical and psychological dimensions of professional sports participation. The discussion covers a comprehensive overview of specific risks, including chronic and acute traumatic injuries, psychological manifestations of mental disorders associated with anxiety, and drug dependencies in their most severe forms. Additionally, the paper explores the societal origins that exacerbate these issues. Furthermore, the paper assesses prevention strategies and mitigation initiatives designed to address the health-related concerns of professional athletes.

PHYSICAL HEALTH IMPACT

Chronic Injuries

Chronic injuries are particularly problematic for professional athletes, as they typically involve recurrent stress or overuse of specific musculoskeletal regions. Examples include repetitive stress injuries, joint damage, and back problems. Professional athletes in sports such as tennis, basketball, and gymnastics are among the most susceptible to these types of repetitive injuries, as their respective activities involve constant repetition of certain movements. For example, tennis players frequently develop rotator cuff injuries, while gymnasts commonly experience lumbar spine injuries [\[3\]](#).

Repetitive stress injuries, like tendinitis and carpal tunnel syndrome, gradually develop but can significantly impair an athlete's performance [2][4]. Similarly, contact sports such as football and hockey often lead to joint damage, particularly in the knees and hips. In fact, studies suggest that up to 60% of retired football players exhibit symptoms of osteoarthritis, a direct consequence of the high-impact nature of their sport [2]. Weightlifters and gymnasts also suffer from long-term back problems, with constant pain and reduced mobility in their later years [5]. Chronic injuries can have long-lasting consequences beyond just physical pain for professional athletes. These conditions often result in diminished mobility, decreased quality of life, and premature retirement from their sport [6]. Additionally, the prolonged medical management of chronic injuries, including procedures such as surgery, physical therapy, and pharmacological treatments, can lead to significant psychological distress and financial burdens for the affected athletes.

Acute Injuries

Acute injuries are sudden and severe physical traumas that occur during high-intensity athletic activities or competitive events. Common examples include fractures, concussions, and ligament tears, which are prevalent across a wide range of sports [7]. Athletes participating in contact sports such as rugby and American football are particularly susceptible to these types of injuries due to the jarring impacts associated with such games. Concussions, in particular, have emerged as an increasingly concerning issue in these sports, with multiple studies linking repetitive head impacts to the development of long-term neurological conditions like chronic traumatic encephalopathy [7].

Fractures are also prevalent acute injuries in contact sports like soccer, where rapid movements and collisions are common. Career-altering fractures, often necessitating prolonged rehabilitation, have occurred among prominent athletes [8]. Similarly, one of the most frequent injuries in basketball and soccer is a tear to the anterior cruciate ligament. ACL injuries are typically characterized by extended recovery periods, typically ranging from six to twelve months, and an elevated risk of re-injury upon return to sport [8].

Recovering from acute injuries is one of the most substantial challenges athletes confront. Beyond the physical implications, extended rehabilitation periods can also induce psychological issues such as anxiety and depression [9]. Furthermore, the pressure to return to

competition prematurely often heightens the risk of re-injury, further jeopardizing an athlete's career longevity.

Overtraining and Burnout

Overtraining is a critical issue in professional sports, reflecting the imbalance between the intensity of training and the time allotted for recovery. Elite athletes are frequently compelled to push their physical boundaries, often leading to the development of overtraining syndrome. The hallmarks of this syndrome include physical exhaustion, hormonal dysregulation, and diminished athletic performance. Research suggests that as many of top-level athletes experience overtraining syndrome during their careers, particularly those engaged in endurance-based sports like marathon running and cycling [\[10\]](#).

The effects of overtraining extend beyond just physical exhaustion. The intense training regimens undertaken by professional athletes can result in the deterioration of their musculoskeletal system, elevating the risk of stress fractures and joint inflammation [\[3\]](#). For instance, endurance sports like marathon running and cycling subject the skeletal structure to persistent stress, which can increase the likelihood of developing conditions such as osteoporosis in these athletes.

Burnout is an associated factor that arises when the mental and physical demands of professional sports become overwhelming. This state is characterized by emotional exhaustion, diminished motivation, and a disconnection from the sport. Burnout is particularly prevalent among athletes who participate in high-pressure international tournaments and endure intensive training regimes. This condition not only impairs their current athletic performance but also increases the risk of premature retirement from their respective sports.

Overtraining and burnout are multifactorial issues, rendering their treatment complex. Effective remedies necessitate a comprehensive approach, incorporating adequate rest periods, a carefully structured training regimen, and psychological support [\[4\]](#). Sports organizations must prioritize the health-related concerns of their athletes, implementing policies that restrict excessive training hours and promote the utilization of mental health resources.

MENTAL HEALTH IMPACT

Performance Pressure and Anxiety

Professional sports can impose tremendous psychological burdens on athletes. The high stakes involved, coupled with public scrutiny and expectations, often lead to heightened performance anxiety. An athlete's performance is met with either celebration for repeated successes or criticism for failures. This intense scrutiny can induce significant psychological stress, manifesting as anxiety or depression. Research indicates that up to 45% of elite athletes report symptoms of anxiety, a rate that is even higher in sports that garner substantial public attention, such as tennis and basketball [\[11\]](#).

The rigorous sporting calendar frequently exacerbates the issue, offering athletes little respite between poor performances and new challenges [\[12\]](#). Moreover, social media amplifies the performance pressure, as both supporters and critics voice their opinions online. Research has linked negative comments and cyberbullying to elevated rates of depression among elite athletes [\[12\]](#).

The psychological impact is further exacerbated by the fear of losing lucrative endorsement deals and income when performance falls short of expectations. Athletes may also experience imposter syndrome, wherein they doubt their competence despite external validation. These pressures can jeopardize not just athletic performance but overall mental well-being, underscoring the importance of incorporating anxiety management strategies into comprehensive athlete support systems.

To address the issue of performance pressure, it is crucial to establish a supportive environment that prioritizes the mental health of athletes. This can be achieved by providing access to sports psychologists, implementing mindfulness training programs, and actively working to reduce the stigma surrounding mental health concerns in the realm of professional sports [\[4\]](#).

Impact of Injuries on Mental Health

Trauma is inherently associated with professional sports, and the psychological consequences are profound. Long-term or career-ending injuries frequently coincide with psychological effects that often manifest as depression and anxiety. Many athletes strongly identify with their

sport, and when an injury sidelines them, it can give rise to feelings of worthlessness and a loss of purpose [13].

Depressive symptoms are prevalent among injured athletes, particularly during extended rehabilitation periods. Research suggests that over half of athletes experiencing injuries exhibit depressive manifestations, with those facing uncertainty regarding their return to play being the most severely affected [14]. The psychological burden stemming from this ambiguity, coupled with the physical discomfort associated with the injury, can create significant mental strain for these athletes.

Prominent examples highlight the significant challenges faced by professional athletes. For instance, the career-ending ankle injury of renowned soccer player Marco van Basten was followed by an extended period of depression as he navigated the transition out of his sport. Similarly, Olympic gymnast Simone Biles has openly discussed the detrimental impact of injury and competitive pressures on her mental well-being.

Effective recovery support is crucial in mitigating the psychological consequences of athletic injuries. Rehabilitation programs should incorporate both physical therapy and psychological counseling to enable athletes to overcome the emotional impact of their injuries. Furthermore, an open and supportive environment should be fostered, where athletes can freely express their fears and concerns, facilitating a holistic healing process.

Substance Abuse

Substance abuse is another significant mental health concern affecting professional athletes. It often arises as a coping mechanism to manage physical discomfort, psychological stress, or the pressure to perform at a high level. The most commonly abused substances include painkillers, performance-enhancing drugs, and recreational drugs, all of which can have severe physical and mental health implications [15].

The use of painkillers, particularly opioids, is widespread among professional athletes as a means to manage chronic or acute pain. While these substances may provide short-term relief, their prolonged use frequently leads to dependency and addiction, which has been well-documented across various sports, including American Football and Rugby [16]. Research estimates that up around 12% of National Football League players engage in the misuse of opioids [16].

Commonly, substances such as anabolic steroids are employed to augment physical capabilities like strength and endurance. The use of these drugs can lead to psychological consequences, including heightened aggression, mood fluctuations, and an elevated risk of depression. Additionally, athletes who discontinue their utilization of performance-enhancing drugs often experience withdrawal symptoms, further exacerbating their mental health challenges.

Another prevalent issue is the recreational use of substances by professional athletes as a means to cope with the high-stress environment of competitive sports. Alcohol and cocaine are examples of substances commonly employed to escape from problems, which can perpetuate a vicious cycle of addiction and poor mental health outcomes.

Addressing substance abuse among athletes necessitates a multifaceted approach encompassing educational initiatives, early intervention measures, and comprehensive support systems. Regular drug testing, when combined with opportunities for counseling and therapy, empowers athletes to identify and address the underlying drivers of their substance use, ultimately enabling them to develop healthier coping mechanisms.

SOCIAL RISKS

Pressure from Organisations and Media

Professional athletes frequently face immense and unparalleled pressure from sports organizations, sponsors, and media, which significantly impacts and compromises their health. The financial power and revenue-driven motives, even from methods that undermine the morale and well-being of athletes, have compelled them to play while physically or psychologically injured. For instance, the demands encourage athletes to compete while injured in order to fulfill the requirements of sponsors and advertisements in major tournaments, ultimately leading to long-term health consequences.

The media's role in exacerbating expectations is significant. Extensive coverage of athletes' personal lives and on-field performance cultivates a relentless cycle of scrutiny, which in turn fuels stress, anxiety, burnout, and other mental health concerns. Notably, media sensationalism has been criticized for perpetuating stigma, as it may discourage athletes from seeking help due to fears of being perceived as weak or unfit for competition.

Sponsors compound this pressure by tying financial rewards to athletic performance, thereby coupling monetary gain with success. Athletes may feel compelled to fulfill these expectations, often at the detriment of their physical and mental well-being. For instance, when tennis

professional Naomi Osaka withdrew from major tournaments to prioritize her mental health, it highlighted the inherent tension between athlete welfare and commercial interests [\[17\]](#).

Sports organizations can mitigate these challenges by enacting comprehensive mental health policies that ensure athletes have access to psychological support and are not penalized for prioritizing their well-being. Collaborative efforts among organizations, sponsors, and the media are essential to reduce excessive pressure and foster a healthier culture within the sports industry.

Inequality in Support Systems

There are disparities in healthcare access and support structures for athletes across different sports. Studies have shown that female professional athletes often receive less comprehensive healthcare and specialized treatment, such as physiotherapy or mental health services, compared to their male counterparts. This lack of adequate healthcare can result in slower recoveries and a higher likelihood of undiagnosed psychological conditions for female athletes [\[18\]](#).

The allocation of resources is influenced by the nature of the sport. More commercially successful sports, such as football and basketball, typically have better-developed healthcare and rehabilitation facilities compared to less prominent sports like gymnastics and wrestling. In contrast, athletes in lower-profile sports often face challenges regarding their injuries and mental health with limited or no access to relevant institutional support [\[19\]](#).

Geographic inequities further reveal disparities in the system, as athletes from developing regions often lack access to advanced healthcare facilities and preventive interventions. These inequities are likely to impact not only the longevity of their athletic careers but also their post-retirement health challenges.

Addressing the structural inequities in sports requires reforms in the governance, resource allocation, and health policy frameworks. Increased investment in athlete development programs, coupled with inclusive healthcare practices, will help bridge the gap and ensure that all professional athletes have access to the necessary means to maintain optimal physical and mental well-being.

PREVENTION

Policy Changes

Sports governing bodies and leagues play a crucial role in implementing policy interventions to mitigate health risks faced by athletes. Mandatory large-scale injury prevention policies can effectively reduce both acute and chronic injuries [\[20\]](#). For instance, programs promoting standardized warm-up and conditioning routines, such as the FIFA 11+ injury prevention program, have demonstrated the potential to decrease musculoskeletal injuries among soccer players in contact sports. Furthermore, policies mandating annual check-ups, coupled with personalized training regimens, can significantly contribute to the close monitoring and management of athletes' physical well-being.

Sports organizations must prioritize mental health by establishing confidential counseling and psychological support services. Integrating mental health awareness programs can help reduce stigma and encourage athletes to seek assistance without fear of professional repercussions [\[21\]](#). The NBA's Mental Health and Wellness Program has set an exemplary standard for integrating comprehensive mental health services into elite sports.

Furthermore, policy reforms should prioritize robust regulations on workload management, particularly in sports with highly condensed schedules. By imposing limits on the number of games an athlete can participate in and mandating recovery periods, the risks of overtraining and burnout can be mitigated, ultimately safeguarding the long-term well-being of athletes [\[22\]](#).

Role of Technology and Medicine

The ability to prevent and manage health risks among athletes has significantly improved with advancements in medical science and technology. Wearable devices like GPS trackers and heart rate monitors provide real-time data on an athlete's physical load and recovery status, enabling coaches to adjust training intensities accordingly. These technologies can also predict injury risk by analyzing biomechanical patterns, providing valuable insights to inform preventative interventions.

Medical advancements have improved the treatment and recovery process for athletes. Techniques such as platelet-rich plasma therapy and modern surgical procedures like

arthroscopy have facilitated faster recoveries with reduced post-injury complications [9]. Additionally, tailored rehabilitation programs in sports medicine now integrate physiotherapy with cognitive-behavioral approaches to address both the physical and psychological aspects of the recovery process [9].

Data analytics also serves a crucial role in mitigating risks. Organizations can pinpoint high-risk patterns by examining injury trends and athlete performance data, allowing them to implement necessary preventive interventions. For instance, Major League Baseball leverages analytics to reduce pitching-related injuries, highlighting the immense potential of data-driven approaches in professional sports. Ultimately, integrating such technological and medical advancements into the sports arena would greatly contribute to enhanced safety and sustainable performance.

CONCLUSIONS

The physical and mental health challenges faced by professional athletes are multifaceted and can significantly impact their performance, both in the short and long term. As this review has highlighted, athletes grapple with a range of issues, from chronic musculoskeletal injuries, such as joint damage and repetitive stress, to acute injuries like fractures and concussions, which can persist throughout their careers. Moreover, the psychological pressures of professional sports, including performance anxiety, mental health conditions, and substance abuse, necessitate a comprehensive approach to athlete well-being. These interconnected health consequences require holistic treatment and interventions to support the overall welfare of athletes.

The sociocultural and structural factors exacerbate the health challenges faced by professional athletes. Organizational and media pressures, coupled with inadequate mental health support and limited healthcare access, reflect systemic gaps that undermine athlete well-being. However, promising policy interventions, such as improved workload management and integrated mental health programs, as well as advancements in technology and medicine, present viable avenues to monitor, predict, and mitigate these health risks more effectively.

It is imperative that stakeholders prioritize the health and well-being of athletes over other factors. Sports organizations should establish comprehensive health and wellness programs, encompassing both physical and mental health services. Governments also have a responsibility to enforce regulations that hold sports leagues accountable for protecting the health of athletes.

Additionally, medical practitioners and researchers must collaborate to enhance preventive strategies and develop innovative, tailored treatments catered to the unique needs of athletes. The future of professional sports hinges on recognizing athletes as more than mere performers; they are human beings whose health and dignity warrant protection. Current and prospective stakeholders must foster an environment prioritizing athlete well-being over performance, thereby ensuring a safer and more equitable landscape. These insights serve as a call to action that stakeholders in the professional sporting realm must heed.

DISCLOSURE

Authors contribution:

Conceptualization: Alicja Grzelak

Methodology: Alicja Grzelak

Software: Sara Langner

Check: Sara Langner

Formal Analysis: Sara Langner

Investigation: Alicja Grzelak

Resources: Alicja Grzelak

Data Curation: Sara Langner

Writing-Rough Preparation: Alicja Grzelak

Writing-Review and Editing: Sara Langner

Visualization: Sara Langner

Supervision: Alicja Grzelak

Project Administration: Alicja Grzelak

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