



## ATHLETES ARE MORE AT RISK OF DEVELOPING AN EATING DISORDER THAN THE GENERAL POPULATION

In sports and performing arts such as dance and acrobatics, the focus is on the shape of the body, and attempts to control the body are common. Training, coupled with having to monitor one's eating or perhaps even coping with undernourishment or underweight, can make athletes and artists more vulnerable to developing an eating disorder.

In weight-class sports, athletes who don't measure up can't compete. This requirement, with which the athlete must comply, places tremendous pressure on the body. In some sports, body change can enhance performance—cycling or swimming, for example—and then there is pressure to lose weight to improve performance.

There is also an image of how an athlete's body is supposed to look, and again the athlete is under immense pressure to conform to this ideal. Culturally, there are positive as well as negative models for healthy eating habits. If coaches have certain practices, if the training includes weigh-ins, if remarks are made about weight, athletes may end up with body preoccupation.

And lastly, the personality traits of the "good athlete" are also characteristic of people with eating disorders: obsessive behaviour, perfectionism, a tendency to anxiety, etc.

## ATHLETES AND THE DIAGNOSIS AND TREATMENT OF EATING DISORDERS

Athletes may react in different ways on learning they have an eating disorder: shock, relief and/or denial (especially when they believe they don't have the physique of someone sick). Keep in mind that athletes with anorexia may not necessarily appear underweight, as may be the case in the general population. Athletes with anorexia are often very muscular. Their body composition is different, and this can become an obstacle to treatment.

Too often, it's hard to differentiate between body obsession and normal behaviour for an athlete, what we expect of those who must perform and have to monitor their eating. The earlier an eating disorder is identified and treated, the less it becomes an integral part of the athlete's identity.

## GREATER OPENNESS TO MENTAL HEALTH IN THE FIELD OF SPORTS

According to Alexia de Macar, who has worked closely with elite athletes for more than 15 years, there has been a big improvement in openness to mental health in the world of sports. In the past, physical health alone was the topic of discussion, but now mental health is discussed in sport conferences.

With the advent of social media, athletes have a platform to share their own mental health experiences. It's less hidden, less of a taboo. We can no longer pretend mental health issues do not exist or that athletes are immune to them. Eating disorders, however, remain the least well-understood aspect of sports and the one that generates the most fear. According to Alexia de Macar, it is not mental health that is stigmatized in sports but rather the image associated with eating disorders.

The need for education and greater awareness about eating disorders is accordingly huge. According to Dr. Richardson, even psychologists without special training in eating disorders are afraid to talk about disordered eating and don't really know how to broach the topic with their clients. Imagine then how a trainer or coach with none of the necessary tools or background might feel when faced with disordered eating. A great deal of work remains to be done for this topic to be easily discussed in the world of sports.

### HOW CAN WE CREATE A HEALTHY AND SAFE ENVIRONMENT WHERE ATHLETES CAN GROW, DEVELOP AND PERFORM WELL WITHOUT BECOMING OBSESSED WITH THEIR BODIES AND RISKING DISORDERED EATING?

The first step is education, for athletes and for everyone involved in the world of sports.

We need to be able to answer the following questions:

- What is healthy eating
- What must athletes eat for sustenance?
- What are normal fluctuations in weight

And we need to talk about physiology, exercise, positive body images, the consequences for an athlete of an inadequate energy intake, etc.

It's also very important to have positive role models in the sports community who promote healthy living habits, a positive body image and above all body diversity among athletes. Diverse body types must be accepted and valued in athletes. Sports organizations must also ensure that they advocate for the health and well-being of the athlete. Obviously, we can't ignore performance, but the individual is just as important. We don't want just a high-performance athlete: we want athletes who are top performers AND who are at ease with themselves, healthy in mind and body.

## THE ATHLETE'S PATH TO DISORDERED EATING AND BODY ISSUES

How does an athlete develop body and eating issues? Think of an athlete who starts her/his career at a young age, for example. At puberty, the body changes dramatically.

The “new” body no longer matches the “ideal” in the sport. This can cause enormous stress and anxiety, and even pressure from teammates, coaches, friends and family to diet. Perhaps one of the athlete’s coaches makes a remark about the athlete’s weight gain, intensifying his/her body preoccupation. The athlete might have this reflection: “I have to lose weight to look like my teammates.” This could start the descent into an eating disorder, with unhealthy beliefs about food, intrusive thoughts, fear of weight gain, etc.

### MALE ATHLETES

More and more male athletes are opening up about their struggles with eating disorders. The ratio of men to women with eating disorders is much closer among athletes than in the general population. Eating disorders are most likely to develop in the acrobatic and artistic sports (dance, gymnastics, diving, figure skating and trampoline) and the weight-class sports (weight-lifting, boxing

### A QUESTION OF IDENTITY, THE SPORT AND THE PLACE AN EATING DISORDER CAN OCCUPY

We know that practicing a sport and being physically active are key elements in maintaining a good quality of life. What do we do, then, for an athlete with an eating disorder when the sport itself can become compensatory behaviour serving the disease?

Eating disorders destroy every sphere of life: family, work, recreation, relationships, etc. The focus becomes appearance, body shape and weight, diet control and related behaviours. For an athlete, the prohibition of training leaves a vast void, as athletes generally spend large amounts of time training. The disease thus comes to take up a big part of the athlete’s life. The athlete who can no longer train still wants to perform, and the eating disorder can become the athlete’s new performance venue. And that’s the danger.

The sport, on the other hand, can become a very positive and healthy experience, if the focus is on the athlete’s strengths, on everything the athlete’s bodies allow him or her to accomplish, and at the highest level. The sport can become the key to a more positive body image.

*We hope this article will be of interest to all our readers; we especially hope that it will provide helpful information and insights for trainers, nutritionists and other professionals in the field of sports, so that they can make athletes aware of the importance of their overall health, especially mental health, and help them manage it better.*

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