Champion Athlete Note

No Happy Endings: Athletics and Teen Suicide

This note is another in the Y-STAR series on becoming more trauma aware and responsive.

Editor’s Note: This week’s note is a difficult topic but one that is important to discuss. Unfortunately, a number of studies now point to dramatic increases in feelings of depression and loneliness in today’s youth and high school students. For persons age 15-24, suicide is now the third leading cause of death (National Institute of Mental Health). This alarming trend must change. We hope this note provides an opportunity for awareness and discussion.

Sports stories are supposed to have happy endings - Rocky’s and Rudy’s and other modern-day David’s are supposed to slay their personal Goliaths through force of will and perseverance in the face of "seemingly insurmountable odds." Athletes with names like Brees and Brady are supposed to rise above physical limitations or moderately-talented beginnings to become "Best in Class" through intellect, savvy and a tireless work ethic. Sports stories are supposed to be about competitors from a tiny island nation with an average temperature of 84 degrees (F) and average rainfall of 78 inches a year, living their dream of becoming Winter Olympic bobsled champions; or the sons of migrant workers helping their parents in the fields before school and running cross country after the last bell, winning the inaugural California State Cross Country Championship in their first year as a team, and four consecutive times thereafter. These stories are supposed to motivate and inspire us to dream big and achieve our own goals.

But not all sports stories have happy endings. This one doesn’t. Some might ask, "Why tell the story if there is no happy ending?" The short answer - because we can’t afford to look away or pretend anymore that things like this can never happen to us, or at our school. It happens every day in schools across America.

On January 17, 2018 news media throughout America began reporting on the apparent suicide of Washington State University quarterback, Tyler Hilinski, from a self-inflicted gunshot wound. Hilinski had left a suicide note, according to reports. Less than a month earlier, Hilinski had led the Cougars in a bowl game against Michigan State University. Even though Washington State lost that game, reports indicated that Hilinski had played well; going on to say that the quarterback had appeared in eight games during his sophomore season, throwing for 1,176 yards and seven touchdowns. His most memorable outing came in the second week of the season when he led Washington State from a 21-point deficit in the fourth quarter to
beat Boise State 47-44 in triple overtime. Hilinski came off the bench to throw for 240 yards and three touchdowns, and was carried off the field after the victory.

The first question many will ask is, "why would someone with so much talent and so much potential take his own life?" There is no simple answer to that question. Perhaps like fellow QB Daniel Olson, Hilinski suffered from mental or emotional distress, though reports have yet to indicate a cause.

Olson, who led his Ishpeming High (MI) Hematites to two Michigan State High School State Championship games in their division, battled, according to his parents, long-standing anxiety and depression that only his immediate family knew about. Some athletes, like Julian Jones, a standout defensive end with numerous scholarship offers and dreams of playing college football like his father, take their lives after career-ending injuries. Or, perhaps as in the cases of Keenan Buhl, co-captain of his high school swim team and member of the track squad at his Minnesota high school, or Marcus Wheeler, a high school track star from Tempe, AZ (video below), we'll never know what triggered those suicides. One theory being researched is that the stress of being a high achiever may be a contributing factor.

Though it's not likely in Hilinski's case, some student athletes commit suicide as a result of bullying. Fourteen-year-old Matthew Burdette, a wrestler and water polo player from San Diego, took his own life after an embarrassing picture of him taken in the boy's bathroom went viral after being posted on multiple social media sites. Seventeen-year-old soccer player, Alexis Pilkington and fourteen-year-old Matthew Homyk who played lacrosse both committed suicide after serious instances of cyber-bullying.

Dr. Brian Hainline, MD, the NCAA's chief medical officer and keynote speaker at a past Play Like a Champion Today Leadership Conference has described student-athlete mental health concerns as even more important long-term than addressing the concussion issue. According to the National Institute of Health statistics, only one-in-three adolescents with mental/emotional health problems actively seek help. That number drops to one-in-ten among high school and college athletes. And even though athletes are no more prone to depression than non-athlete peers, male athletes are five times more likely to attempt and complete (or harm themselves seriously enough to require hospitalization) suicide when depressed as compared to non-student-athletes.

According to Thomas Joiner, author of Myths About Suicide (Harvard University Press), research identifies a number of factors that contribute to suicide risk in student athletes, including: 1) high-achieving athletes often feel immense pressure to perform at a high level and may experience feelings of inadequacy and failure; 2) athletes may experience isolation due to the demands of training and competition; 3) athletes may face academic, financial, or family stress; 4) athletes may have a history of mental illness or substance abuse; and 5) athletes may have a genetic predisposition to suicide. It's important for coaches, parents, and athletes to be aware of these factors and to seek help if they are struggling.
suicide is more likely to occur when three conditions exist: 1) the individual perceives themselves to be a burden in some way, 2) the individually feels socially isolated or feels they don't really belong anywhere, and 3) the individual feels fearless in the face of death. Some experts argue that because athletes learn from a very young age to confront and push through their fears, they are more prone to attempting suicide.

Hope for Happy Endings

One high school student-athlete has stepped up and made teen suicide awareness and treatment his passion. Luke Bottari, a quarterback from the Bay area of California has created the Play4Prevention Foundation (video right). The University of Michigan’s Athletes Connected program is using traditional and social media to get the word out, and the message is beginning to trickle down to the high school level (video below, left).

Coaches can do your part in the following ways:

Talk openly with your players about depression, anxiety and the stresses faced by today’s student-athlete and teens in general, not once, but throughout the season and off-seasons as well.

Don't gloss over or sugar-coat discussions - using terms like "suicide", "killing yourself", or "Taking one's life" won't push anyone over the edge,

- Obtain a commitment from each and every player to reach out to a trusted adult if a teammate talks to them about depression and suicide, there's no room for secrecy,
- Have a school-wide plan for dealing with mental health emergencies the way you do for physical health emergencies
- Provide players and parents with resource information including who they can
Suicidal ideation is less about wanting to die, and more about wanting to reduce the current emotional pain. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, if a player or other student comes to you with thoughts of suicide:

1. Ask: "Are you thinking about killing yourself?" It's not an easy question but studies show that asking at-risk individuals if they are suicidal does not increase suicides or suicidal thoughts.
2. Keep them safe: Reducing a suicidal person's access to highly lethal items or places is an important part of suicide prevention. While this is not always easy, asking if the at-risk person has a plan and removing or disabling the lethal means can make a difference.
3. Be there: Listen carefully and learn what the individual is thinking and feeling. Findings suggest acknowledging and talking about suicide may in fact reduce rather than increase suicidal thoughts. *(Never promise to keep suicidal thoughts a secret)*
4. Help them connect: Save the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline's number in your phone so it's there when you need it: 1-800-273-TALK (8255). You can also help make a connection with a trusted individual like a school counselor, a family member, friend, spiritual advisor, or mental health professional.
5. Stay Connected: Staying in touch after a crisis or after being discharged from care can make a difference. Studies have shown the number of suicide deaths goes down when someone follows up with the at-risk person.

Please use the following resources to become more aware of the mental health of student-athletes and to seek help if you or someone you know is struggling with these issues.

- Suicide Prevention Resource Center https://www.sprc.org/
- https://www.samhsa.gov/suicide-prevention Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Admin
- https://store.samhsa.gov/product/SMA12-4669 Free Suicide Toolkit for High schools
- https://store.samhsa.gov/apps/suicidesafe/ Suicide Safe Mobile App
- https://notmykid.org/ Not My Kid - Inspiring Positive Life Choices
- https://play4p.org/ Play 4 Prevention

Listen: Podcast on Childhood Suicide and Keeping Kids Safe Online
Listen: Podcast on Warning Signs for Childhood Suicide
Watch: Suicide Prevention and Research: Dr. Jane Pearson talks about warning signs as well as progress in suicide prevention.
National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, 1-800-273-TALK (8255)
https://www.crisistextline.org/ Crisis Text Line
https://safespace.org/ Safe Space

Note: the names of and information about the athletes referred to in this note are a matter of public record obtained from reputable news sources and youtube.com. No confidentiality was knowingly compromised.
Less than 48 hours left to register at Early Bird pricing!

Our 2018 Sports Leadership Conference takes place June 22-23, 2018 on the beautiful campus of the University of Notre Dame. Time is running out to get the special Early Bird rate, as prices go up when the clock strikes midnight on February 28th!

Don't miss out on what attendees describe as the premiere annual conference for youth and high school coaches and administrators. Secure your discounted rate by clicking the link below and registering now!

Register for the 2018 Conference by Clicking Here!

A Prayer for Athletes

Good Saint Dymphna, great wonder-worker in every affliction of mind and body, we humbly implore your powerful intercession for all those struggling with stress, anxiety, or depression. May we offer our support of teammates and classmates who may be having difficulty at this moment in time.

Grant that we may have the grace to be a source of joy and hope for those in most need. May our team be unified in our support of one another and may we create an environment that encourages fearless work toward our goals while glorifying God and loving each other.

Good Saint Dymphna, intercess for us and implore that our Blessed Mother Mary may lift our prayers to her Son, Our Lord Jesus Christ. We ask all this in His name. Amen.