

# Injured Athletes' Perceived Loss of Identity: Educational Implications for Athletic Trainers

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**Context:** As educators, athletic trainers should familiarize athletes with the concepts of self-acceptance self-esteem and identity to assuage psychological trauma accompanying injury because the more a person identifies with being an athlete, the more difficult it is to deal with athletic injury.

**Objective:** The objective of this article is to provide practical information to athletic trainers to assist them with their educative role in addressing athletes' identity loss that often accompanies athletic injury.

**Background:** Measures of psychological trauma accompanying physical trauma show that psychological trauma can be extreme. Furthermore, the loss of identity is a major factor for athletes who are dealing with the psychological trauma of athletic injuries. Athletic trainers who assume responsibility to address issues of psychological loss from athletic injury can be a great benefit to the injured individual.

**Description:** The use of the Worth Index, which differentiates between self-acceptance self-esteem and achievement self-esteem, demonstrates that it is possible for people to perceive their personal worth and identity as distinct from their behavior. Athletic trainers are in an excellent position to interact with athletes and utilize specific questions to facilitate dialogue related to identity and self-esteem.

**Clinical Advantages:** In practice, clinical advantages may include improving an athlete's ability to put a physical injury in proper perspective, strengthening their commitment to rehabilitation, and avoiding complications due to emotional trauma.

**Conclusions:** Athletic trainers must recognize their educative responsibilities and assist injured athletes in addressing issues of identity loss.

**Key Words:** self-acceptance, self-esteem, identity, worth, inherent value, injury

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It has been proposed that psychological trauma accompanying athletic injury could be minimized and injury rehabilitation enhanced if athletes and their significant others valued and identified the athlete as separate from his or her athletic accomplishments and performance.<sup>2</sup> The objective of this article is to provide practical information to athletic trainers to assist them with their educative role in addressing athletes' identity loss that often accompanies athletic injury.

A major clinical sports medicine concern for athletic trainers is recognizing the emotional trauma from perceived loss of identity that can accompany athletic injuries, and which must be considered during injury rehabilitation.<sup>2</sup> In a consensus statement released in 2006,<sup>1</sup> The American Academy of Family Physicians, American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons, American College of Sports Medicine, American Medical Society for Sports Medicine, American Orthopaedic Society for Sports Medicine, and the American Osteopathic Academy of Sports Medicine concluded that team physicians and athletic trainers must consider psychological factors when treating injured athletes. Furthermore, they suggested that identity loss was one of the most common emotional problems accompanying injury, with additional signs and symptoms of psychological stress including: negative self-talk, lack of concentration, uncontrollable negative thoughts, and self-doubt.<sup>1</sup>

## Athletic Identity

The Athletic Identity Measure Survey (AIMS) measures the extent to which an athlete ties his or her identity to athletics or sports competition.<sup>3</sup> Based on the adult model measurement of athletic identity, researchers have developed a 40-item Athletic Identity Questionnaire (AIQ) to measure the athletic identity of adolescents.<sup>4</sup> Since its creation 13 years ago, the AIMS shows very high internal consistency, with Cronbach's alphas ranging between  $\alpha=0.80$  and  $\alpha=0.91$ .<sup>5</sup> Results from AIMS data indicate that elite athletes tend to have a higher athletic identity than recreational athletes,<sup>6</sup> with those with higher athletic identity more apt to experience depressive reactions after injury than those with a lower athletic identity.<sup>7</sup> Attitudes of significant others, such as coaches, teammates, athletic trainers and parents, can also significantly affect athletic identity.<sup>8</sup>

Research indicates that the more an individual identifies with athletic performance (high athletic identity), the less stable their individual identity and self-esteem.<sup>8,9</sup> Identity based on athletic performance is, by its very nature, unstable and prone to variability. Therefore, an injury that disrupts athletic performance is more psychologically deleterious to athletes with high athletic identity because the injury provokes a perceived loss of identity when the athlete is not able to perform.<sup>3</sup> Athletes with low athletic identity, on the other hand, view athletics as something they do

rather than who they are, and can more effectively cope with life changing stresses.<sup>10</sup>

## Severity of the Problem

The Impact of Event Scale was developed to measure people's perceptions of distress accompanying traumatic life events.<sup>11</sup> While the scale is not athletics-specific, researchers have used it to compare the psychological effects of injuries to life threatening disasters. For example, one study using 280 Division I athletes found that the perceived impact of chronic injury was equivalent to the impact of natural disasters like floods and hurricanes. It was discovered that these elite athletes perceived chronic injury as a life or death matter.<sup>12</sup> While not conclusive, it lends strength to the argument that psychological trauma following an injury is difficult for an athlete to cope with.<sup>13</sup>

## Disparate Paths to Identity and Self-Esteem

Research using AIMS indicates that it is commonplace and quite natural for highly competitive or elite athletes to identify themselves as an athlete.<sup>14</sup> According to ethnopsychology, motives for action and perceptions about ourselves derive from the culture in which we live.<sup>15</sup> Societal attitudes tend to reinforce a positive sense of identity and esteem in individuals because of athletic prowess. However, there is another approach to establishing individual identity.

According to Hewitt,<sup>15</sup> Americans tend to follow two contradictory paths to self-esteem. One path requires the individual to achieve something to earn a good sense of self (achievement self-esteem), while the other path requires acceptance of self regardless of achievement (self-acceptance self-esteem). These two self-esteem paths are contradictory in that one draws from an internal source and the other from an external source to establish a good sense of self. Athletic performance would be an example of an external source on which athletes depend for a positive sense of self. On the other hand, athletes who accept themselves regardless of athletic performance are basing a positive sense of self on individual value distinct from and not dependent on athletic performance.

## Self-Acceptance Self-Esteem in College Students

To ascertain whether individuals perceive their personal worth as earned or innate, Lockhart and Rencher developed the Worth Index to measure the extent to which self-esteem is based on achievement or self-acceptance.<sup>16</sup> The Worth Index was validated against the Rosenberg Scale ( $r=.86$ ,  $p<.001$ ), and has good two week test-retest reliability ( $r=.74$ ,  $p<.001$ ).<sup>16</sup> A study using the Worth Index demonstrated that college students reported having self-acceptance self-esteem rather than achievement self-esteem.<sup>17</sup>

## Research to Practice

As athletic trainers embrace clinically-related research, they perpetuate the scientific foundations of the profession.<sup>18</sup> Athletic trainers acknowledge that psychological skills augment the rehabilitation process.<sup>19</sup> Even without extensive professional training, health professionals, like athletic trainers, perceive that they are instrumental in creating a caring environment for healing.<sup>20</sup> Also important is achieving a deeper sense of self and identity as part of individual spirituality and values. As such, after surveying 291 program directors from accredited professional programs in the United States, Udermann et al. called for spirituality to be included in athletic training education programs curricula.<sup>21</sup>

Deci,<sup>22</sup> a recognized expert in human motivation, used insight from years of study to summarize the difference between achievement self-esteem and self-acceptance self-esteem as follows. Ego-involvement is a psychological term used to describe individuals whose performance outcomes dictate their self-esteem. When a good sense of self is contingent on winning games, self-esteem is ego-bound, unstable, and based on being better than others. If the athlete loses, there is a tendency toward negative self-talk and self-debasement. Self-acceptance self-esteem, on the other hand, is the opposite of ego-involvement, and is based on intrinsic motivation. Self-accepting individuals are well aware of their behaviors and performances, but their self-esteem is not inexorably linked to them.<sup>22</sup>

### Principles Associated with Self-Acceptance Self-Esteem

Achievement self-esteem is the more familiar and the more usual form of self-esteem, and until recently, there has been little to challenge the idea that self-esteem should be based on achievements. Self-acceptance self-esteem, on the other hand, is based on principles derived from research and scholarly literature. The following are basic principles underlying self-acceptance self-esteem and how they relate to injured athletes:

1. *Identity remains intact regardless of circumstances. The athlete is able to maintain perspective and refrain from blowing the injury out of proportion.*
2. *Successes and failures do not define the athlete. Keeping performance distinct from identity allows t to deal with them objectively and with less ego-involvement. Injury impacts performance, but since performance is not a part of ego, there is no loss of identity.*
3. *Every person holds the same intrinsic value. The athlete should not elevate themselves above or subjugate themselves below others due to any circumstance or achievement. Not being able to play does not diminish an athlete's worth. Personal value is distinct from performance, accomplishments, or behavior.*
4. *Self respect leads to positive self-talk. While injury may negatively affect performance, it does not affect their self.*

Table 1 compares achievement self-esteem and identity and self-acceptance self-esteem and identity.

### Addressing the Problem

A substantial contribution to the student athlete's well being may be made by athletic trainers through education as they teach and assure athletes that they have a choice between self-acceptance self-esteem and achievement self-esteem. Ironically, because athletic identity and accomplishment self-esteem are often so well entrenched in athletes, it may actually take an injury which disrupts athletic performance for some athletes to learn this invaluable lesson.

### Adopting a different perspective

How is it possible for the athlete to embrace self-acceptance self-esteem, especially while engaged in athletic competition? Initially the athlete needs to realize that it is possible to form a concept of self that is distinct from his or her athletic performance. This is a cognitive approach that is logical.

However, even though logical, esteeming oneself apart from success or failures is often difficult to do. Several additional conceptual possibilities may help an individual move toward a self-acceptance paradigm.

1. *Appeal to one's logic,. Does losing or winning a game really define who you are? There is so much more to you as a person.*
2. *Appeal to one's beliefs. Do you believe in a Higher Power as the creator of life? Is God a source of your identity and value?*
3. *Appeal to longevity. Over a lifetime, who will you be when you no longer compete? You go on after the playing ends.*

Significant others may be instrumental in guiding an athlete toward self-acceptance self-esteem. Parents can tell children that they love them whether they win or lose. They can relate to their child as a person first and then as an athlete. It is possible to assure the athlete that you value them without regard to athletic prowess. Coaches can also express value for the individual apart from athletic performance. Athletic trainers can focus on treating the person first as a valued individual, then focus on the injury.

### Additional Challenges

Adopting self-acceptance self-esteem minimizes identity loss due to trauma because identity is not based on performance.<sup>23</sup> Additional concerns involve the athlete's future. Elite skiers expressed fears that resulted from suffering an injury. The psychological stress from worries of getting injured again in the future and possibly losing their edge and not being able to reach their dreams was more traumatic than the actual physical injury.<sup>24</sup>

**Table 1.** Characteristics of Achievement Self-Esteem and Self-Acceptance Self-Esteem

<b>Achievement Self-Esteem</b>	<b>Self-Acceptance Self-Esteem</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Self is defined by accomplishment <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>being an effective human being</li> <li>capable body, mind and spirit</li> <li>"I am a skilled athlete"</li> <li>"I have a good, athletic body"</li> </ol> </li> <li>Identity tied to accomplishment <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>accomplished athlete is who I am</li> <li>self is what I do</li> <li>"I am a football player"</li> </ol> </li> <li>Self-esteem comes from accomplishments <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>importance increases with accomplishments</li> <li>"I am important because I am a good athlete"</li> <li>"I feel good about myself because: good athlete, attractive, successful"</li> </ol> </li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Self is an entity of its own <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>an individual human being</li> <li>individual body, mind, and spirit</li> <li>"I am a unique person"</li> <li>"My body, mind, and spirit compose my being"</li> </ol> </li> <li>Identity distinct from accomplishment <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>identify with self</li> <li>self is me; what I do is my experience</li> <li>"I am a person who plays football"</li> </ol> </li> <li>Self-esteem is independent of accomplishments <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>importance is the same for each person</li> <li>"I am important due to my intrinsic value"</li> <li>"I feel good about myself as a human being"; "Every person is of equal value/importance"</li> </ol> </li> </ol>
<b>Ramifications in terms of identity and behavior</b>	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>"I am a winner/loser"</li> <li>"I am a failure"</li> <li>"I am nobody now that I can't play"</li> <li>"Who am I now that I can't play?"</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>"I am me. I won or lost a game."</li> <li>"I am me. I failed a test."</li> <li>"I am me. I want to get over my injury."</li> <li>"I am me. I have a life other than athletics."</li> </ol>

With self-acceptance self-esteem, an athlete has the personal security to envision a positive future. Certainly adaptations may have to be made, but these can be approached with optimism rather than fear. Alternatives to athletic competition seem reasonable because the athlete's identity is not tied solely to a sport.

## Putting This All Together

Athletic trainers are in an environment conducive to assisting athletes to overcome perceived loss of identity associated with injuries. Specific suggestions for application will address three scenarios: individual interaction with an athlete, a class setting or doing research.

### Individual Interaction

Athletic trainers are in a unique position to educate athletes and facilitate the exploration of athletic identity. When treating an injured athlete, both informal and formal questions can be used. These questions should ascertain the extent to which the person takes his or her identity from being an athlete and whether he or she thinks in terms of achievement self-esteem or self-acceptance self-esteem. Having an athlete answer the following questions can facilitate the exploration of athletic identity and self esteem:

#### *Athlete Identity*

- Sport is the most important part of my life. Without it, what else do I have?*

- I am very depressed because I am injured and cannot compete in sport. What good is my life now?*
- Being an athlete is who I am. Who am I if I can't compete?*

#### *Self-esteem*

- Being successful in the eyes of other people is vital to my happiness. Who will like me if I can't succeed?*
- My value as a person is tied to my athletic performance. If I do well, I feel good about myself. If I do poorly, I don't feel good about myself. Isn't this how everyone feels?*
- I do not like myself as well when other people outdo me. How can I like myself if I can't play? What if I can never play as well again?*

High athlete identity and achievement self-esteem are the attitudes that will lead to the most psychological trauma accompanying the injury. Help this person articulate an identity other than as an athlete. Help the individual with these attitudes realize that every human being has value or worth and not everyone can be an athlete. Moving to a perspective of low athlete identity and self-acceptance self-esteem will help the individual cope with his or her injury.

### Class Setting

Use Table 1 and the listed principles to teach the concept of athlete identity and the ramifications of having this identity. Discuss

how being an athlete can become such a part of one's identity. Analyze how psychologically serious an injury is to someone who has high athlete identity.

Also use Table 1 and the suggestions for adopting a different perspective to discuss the difference between achievement self-esteem and self-acceptance self-esteem. Many students may not have considered that there are two differing paths to self-esteem. Raise awareness about the impact taking a good sense of self from external sources such as success in athletics has on a person. Consider what life would be like if people did not have to rely on a certain appearance or high achievements to like themselves.

Case studies could stimulate interesting discussions. What ideas do the students have to help someone enjoy self-acceptance self-esteem and low athlete identity? How do the students see these ideas assisting an injured athlete so the experience is not so traumatic?

### Research

The AIMS and Worth Index are both valid and reliable tools to use for research. Additional tools do not need to be developed. They are both easily administered and are not time intensive. There certainly is a need for further research in this area.

### Conclusion

It is common for an athlete to suffer a perceived loss of identity when injured.<sup>1,2,3,6,12</sup> The ideas discussed in this article are designed to help athletic trainers in their role as educators to assist injured athletes to minimize the emotional trauma that usually accompanies an injury. With emphasis placed on being the best in an athletic culture that assigns personal value mainly to winners, how can a person come to believe that his or her life has worth and importance distinct from athletic accomplishments?

It is possible for athletes to experience self-acceptance self-esteem rather than achievement self-esteem. It is also possible for elite athletes to have a low athlete identity. A combination of these two perspectives can minimize the psychological trauma that accompanies athletic injury because the athlete will not suffer perceived loss of identity due to injury. Athletic trainers are in a unique position to encourage athletes to adopt self-acceptance self-esteem and low athlete identity.

We have the tools to discern athletes' perceptions of their identity and their individual value or importance. AIMS is a measure of the athlete's personal identity with athletic performance. AIQ is a measure of the athlete's personal identity with athletic performance geared toward adolescents. The Worth Index is a tool that differentiates between achievement self-esteem and self-acceptance self-esteem. Whether the athletic trainer uses these formal tools or incorporates the ideas from these tools in a less formal way, these perspectives can help athletes deal with injury in an emotionally mature manner.

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