

Keeping young athletic fires burning

Psychologists probe the reasons why youthful athletes lose interest in once-loved sports.

By Nathan Seppa
Monitor staff

What would make a promising tennis player, the star athlete of her junior high school and someone headed for national competition, suddenly drop the sport at age 12?

Adolescents leave sports for many reasons. Some just decide to spend more time doing other things, such as working, pursuing other sports or being with friends. Some reach the peak of their skill development, and don't win matches anymore.

But other talented young athletes who say they truly love to play a sport abruptly drop it. In sports vernacular, they burn out.

Over the past 20 years, the term 'burnout' has become routine fodder for sports talk shows and popular magazines. In general, researchers define burnout as the psychological, physical and emotional withdrawal from a formerly enjoyable activity due to stress. Burnout has also been called a state of emotional exhaustion that can lead to negative responses to others, low self-esteem and depression.

Burnout is spawned the moment the 'costs' of a sport outweigh its rewards, if the costs are stress-induced, said Daniel Gould, PhD, a professor in the department of exercise and sport science at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Gould and his colleagues found that many burned-out athletes were unable to cope with their own perfectionistic personalities. Others burned out from 'playing up' too much against older players, a common technique coaches use to expose players to tougher competition. Some players had overzealous coaches or parents, which contributed to their stress. And others overtrained and became stale.

The U.S. Tennis Association (USTA), which funded Gould's study, is using the findings to alert players, parents and coaches to the warning signs of burnout. The organization has already limited the number and frequency of national tournaments it offers youngsters, and has encouraged doubles play at such competitions, said sport psychologist Ron Woods, PhD, director of player development at USTA.

Meanwhile, burnout affects other sports young people engage in, too. Especially susceptible are gymnasts, swimmers and skaters -sports of individual competition, Woods said. They lack teammates.

Burnout research

Burnout isn't confined to sports. The first burnout studies were conducted on nurses, teachers and mental health workers in the mid-1970s. But researchers became curious as to why highly gifted, driven athletes would give up. The problem, it seemed, was psychological.

Gould and his research team amassed data on 30 'junior elite' tennis players who dropped out of competitive tennis between the ages of 12 and 18, and compared it to information on 32 other players who did not. They followed up with in-depth interviews of 10 burned-out players, seven of whom never played competitively again.

Gould's research supported a conceptual model of burnout set up by University of Washington psychology professor Ronald E. Smith, PhD, in 1986. He attributed burnout to 'chronic stress' and developed four stages for the model:

- Demands are placed on the athlete, including a training regime and high expectations
- The athlete perceives these as excessive.
- Tension, anxiety or insomnia set in.
- Performance declines and/or the athlete withdraws from the sport.

While the subjects in Gould's research generally followed the four stages outlined by Smith, Gould's team also found that no two cases of burnout were exactly the same. But perfectionism cropped up noticeably. It could be 'a real strength or an Achilles heel,' Gould said. 'You want that inner drive, but you don't want it with the baggage-.The key is to harness it.'

In his studies, Gould considered burnout to be a playing stoppage of many months, not just a few weeks off.

In the in-depth interviews, one player said: 'I just never wanted to practice anymore-.The biggest thing, though was lack of energy and lack of motivation, you know. I couldn't get myself to, you know, give 100 percent. Physically I wouldn't feel that tired, but I guess mentally and emotionally I'd feel really drained.'

Another player said: 'I was interested in what other kids were doing and I felt like tennis was always kind of handcuffing me in a way, socially, you know.'

Classifying stressors

The researchers measured how much input the players had in their training, counted practice hours, gauged personality variables such as coping and perfectionism and recorded who 'played up' the most, said Eileen Udry, PhD, an assistant professor in the University of Oregon department of exercise and movement science who worked with Gould.

They classified the stressors players mentioned, how many players mentioned them and how often, Udry said.

Psychological stressors-such as emphasis on ranking, pressure from a coach to have a winning attitude or parental pressure to practice-emerged most often, she said.

Social pressures were second-opponents who cheated on points, negative team atmosphere (since everyone in tennis is your potential opponent) and other players' parents yelling at their children on the court.

Logistical stressors ranked third-traveling a lot and switching schools. Last were physical stressors, such as injuries or staleness, Udry said.

The term 'burnout' carries a huge stigma in the world of elite tennis, Gould said. As they tested and interviewed players, the researchers used terms such as 'tennis difficulties' or 'motivation problems' instead of burnout. 'They view [burning out] as a personality flaw; something's wrong with you,' he said. The data will be published in *The Sport Psychologist*.

Role of stress

Stress is not the cause of burnout; it is a symptom, argues sociologist Jay Coakley, PhD, a professor at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs. Coakley studied 16 adolescent competitive downhill skiers and tennis players who had burned out and concluded it arose from external circumstances the athletes encountered, he wrote in *Sociology of Sport Journal*, September, 1992.

For example, the elite adolescent athlete has a constrained set of life experiences that lead to a unidimensional self-concept, Coakley said. Without a multidimensional identity, a player has too much of the self invested in one sport.

Players felt cut off from their peers because they had to leave school immediately to practice their sport, he said.

On the other hand 'they started to feel that without involvement in sports they would have a difficult time maintaining satisfactory relationships with their parents. Everything revolved around sports,' he said.

Meanwhile, the athletes in individual sports were losing control of their lives to coaches and parents, he found. In contrast, he observed that players in team sports feel stress less often because teammates cooperate to undercut the power of the coach at times. 'They would collectively get together to take more control of at least parts of their lives,' he said.

Thus, Coakley said, stress management might be helpful in controlling burnout in the short term, but the overarching set of circumstances causing it-a unidimensional self-concept and powerlessness in their lives-may still exist.

Preventing burnout

Coaches and parents need good 'radar' to pick up unspoken signals that something is wrong with an athlete, Gould said.

Gould, Udry and others provided the USTA with recommendations for coaches aimed at preventing burnout, some of which acknowledge Coakley's theory.

They include:

- Educate parents and players on stress-management strategies.
- Limit travel demands and 'playing up.'
- Allow players to have a say in training.
- Minimize parental coaching and criticizing.

- Set realistic goals.

Having other interests, Coakley said, would serve as a buffer when a player encounters failure, as all do.

Parents and coaches need to be aware of young athletes who are perfectionists, Udry said, because innocuous parental remarks can be perceived as critical.

Meanwhile, coaches and parents need to make the distinction between harmful overtraining and appropriate exposure to training stress, said Jim Loehr, EdD, president of LGE Sport Science in Orlando, who worked with Gould and Udry.