Vol 2, Issue 21: Grieving and Loss in Athletics

Grieving and Loss in Athletics

Athletics provides us with some of the best experiences in our lives. Sharing victories, feeling camaraderie, and forming relationships are all things that those who have participated in sports remember. The importance of these relationships and being a part of a close knit group is part of what makes it so difficult when tragedy strikes a team or school. The recent death of the mascot for the University of North Carolina after their NCAA tournament game is a sad reminder of how fleeting life can be. Unfortunately, such tragic deaths occur at all levels and ages of sport participation. When an athlete dies, it is a challenge for teammates, coaches, friends and parents and offers an opportunity for everyone to come together in their grief.

During the process of grieving, athletes’ physical, cognitive, and emotional states can all be affected. Performances may be sluggish, mental mistakes may be more frequent, and mood may swing from highs to lows. In addition, athletes may be more susceptible to injury as they cope with the stress of this loss. Knowledge about how athletes and coaches may be affected by the death of a team or teammate can help everyone to be prepared for the grieving process as it occurs.

One of the biggest challenges that survivors face after tragedy has struck is figuring out how to “get back to normal.” We often expect grieving people to quickly “get back to normal” and thus may communicate that grief should avoided rather than embraced, or as something to be overcome, rather than experienced. In actuality, when people are allowed to move toward their grief and to mourn openly, their grief becomes less intense and more manageable over time. After all, the ultimate goal of an athlete or coach who is dealing with grief is be able to return to their previous “selves” on the playing field. By supporting the process of grieving, we are not encouraging people to dwell, but rather are helping them to lesson the intensity of what they are experiencing.

Sometimes, people find that friends and family are not able to provide the level or kinds of support needed during the grieving or mourning process. Friends and family may be overwhelmed with their own grief, or be unable to provide support because they themselves have fallen victim to societal myths about grieving (“get over it quickly”) or just may be uncomfortable with the strong expression of emotions. In those situations, it often is helpful for athletes and coaches to seek support from others, such as counselors, clergy, or sport psychologists. Professionals, such as a sport psychology consultant, who have the proper training can help you understand your grieving process and provide a place for you to grieve fully and naturally so you can move through your grief to find continued meaning in life.

At the Center for Sport Psychology and Performance Excellence at the University of North Texas, we have a dedicated staff of sport consultants who can help coaches and athletes deal with loss. For more information please call us at 940-369-7767 or visit our website at www.sportpsych.unt.edu or email us at sportpsych@unt.edu. As always, we leave you with our sport quote of the week:
“We acquire the strength we have overcome” –Ralph Waldo Emerson