

What injured athletes can teach us about recovery and resilience

BY CHEYANNE MUMPHREY
ASSOCIATED PRESS

FLAGSTAFF, Ariz. — Serious injuries and medical conditions disrupt people's daily routines and can impact their confidence and sense of identity. Elite athletes know the challenges from an injury that sidelines them from their sport, requires physical rehabilitation and leaves their ability to return to competition in doubt.

The process that top athletes go through to heal physically, mentally and emotionally highlights what a recovery might demand of athletes at all levels, as well as people experiencing chronic pain, recuperating from surgery or facing other setbacks. Because progress is rarely linear, patience and the ability to reset expectations can be as valuable as perseverance, consistency and motivation, according to experts.

"Sport has always mimicked life," said Ross Flowers, a sports and performance psychologist in Los Angeles. "You're going to face challenges, bumps and bruises. You got to figure out how to work through them and overcome them."

Here's what some sports psychologists and former athletes say about con-



Evgeniy Maloletka / AP Photo

Ivan Shostak, right, a blind Ukrainian war veteran touches an injured arm of his comrade during a pottery workshop at a rehabilitation center in Vinnytsia, Ukraine, on May 21.

fronting the unknown and coming through injuries:

LEARN TO RECOGNIZE YOUR BODY'S PHYSICAL LIMITS

Fans are accustomed to watching athletes compete at the Olympics, the World Cup and other sporting events with broken bones, torn ligaments and dislocated joints. Comeback stories like Alpine skier Lindsey Vonn 's, after multiple injuries and another serious injury this year at the Winter Olympics, are an enduring element of sports.

While discomfort is expected during intense training, and pushing through pain becomes

more critical during competition, even seasoned competitors need to know when to listen to their bodies, experts say.

"There's a relationship with pain and understanding how to work with it, if it's possible to work through it, but also knowing how to back off of it so the pain does not persist," Flowers said, adding that training to the point of physical fatigue or in conditions that build endurance is the sweet spot for improvement.

Liv Paxton, 28, learned this lesson firsthand after dealing with shin splints, quadricep strains and a partially torn Achilles tendon. As a runner at

Winthrop University and the College of William & Mary, she pushed herself until her body forced her to stop. Since recovering from Achilles surgery, she said she has a better understanding of when to slow down.

"I'm so much better about keeping in tune with my body," Paxton said, explaining that she prioritizes eating and sleeping well. "That's not something that I focused on in college. I just thought I was bullet-proof."

Injuries can happen suddenly or develop from a nagging but manageable nuisance into a debilitating condition over time. Whether it's a soccer player sidelined after a collision or a worker who can't stand after months of chronic back pain, the outcome is similar: a forced pause and learning to heal once pushing through pain no longer works.

"So how do we know our limits? It is definitely an experimental process," said Lisa Miller, a health and sport sciences professor who teaches at the online American Public University System from her home in Columbus, Ohio. "We have plenty of athletes who still don't know. But we have also had more examples of athletes saying this is too

much, I'm burned out and I'm going to take a break, bringing much more attention to the psychological side of sport."

Honestly assessing whether an injury is affecting daily life and long-term well-being is part of recognizing one's physical limits. Miller said she has seen athletes of all levels return to competition thinking they are ready to excel, but not all can or do.

Tennis great Serena Williams made the difficult decision to withdraw from a doubles match this month because of a knee injury.

TAKE TIME TO GRIEVE LOSSES AND ADAPT TO NEW CHALLENGES

Even after bones heal and surgeries succeed, experts say recovery can mean coming to terms with what injuries have changed and giving yourself permission to grieve those losses.

Former Baltimore Ravens cornerback Kyle Arrington, who is now a community activist in Maryland, spent nearly two decades with every hour of his day organized around football. After a severe concussion ended his career, that structure disappeared almost overnight.

"I knew what everything looked like year in and year

out for the past almost 20 years," said Arrington, who was a Super Bowl champion during his tenure with the New England Patriots. "To have that stripped away in a blink of an eye was a real upheaval."

Grief and depression are common after season- or career-ending injuries and other life-altering experiences. People making a physical recovery may also mourn lost friendships, missed opportunities, unmet goals and a sense of purpose. The emotional pain can be especially acute when someone's self-identity rested on excelling in a sport or a professional role.

Arrington, 39, said his post-concussion retirement took him to a dark place. He credits family and friends with helping him through the transition; with their encouragement, he committed to healing mentally, emotionally and spiritually. Arrington said he now puts his energy toward the E.V.O.L.V.E. Foundation, which he founded to mentor young people.

Experts say a support system can help people stay grounded when they have to make major medical and career decisions.

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* Sanctuary at Mallard Lake LLC to Fischer Homes Louisville, LLC; Lot 307, Sanctuary at Mallard Lake, Phase 3, Section A, and Lot 340, Sanctuary at Mallard Lake, Phase 3, Section B; \$123,900
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* Dennis Aaron and Carrie Waddell to India Yocum and Kenneth Clarke; Lot 75, Mallard Pointe, Section 3; \$279,900
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* The Brenda C. Blevens Irrevocable Trust to Virginia Hampton; Lot 207, Terrace of Twelve Oaks Subdivision, Section II; \$315,000
* Richard W. Burke to Quick Sell, LLC; 2.95 acres; \$235,000
* Fischer Homes Louisville, LLC to Tiffany Ann and Joshua Curtis Roach; Lot 314, Sanctuary at Mallard Lake, Phase 3, Section A; \$414,986
* Fischer Homes Louisville, LLC to Julia Ann and Richard Cameron Russ; Lot 152, Bluegrass Meadows, Section 2; \$540,479

* Twelve Oaks Development Corporation to Donna B. Ashley; Lot 244, Twelve Oaks Subdivision, Section 5; \$51,000
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