

Risk Factor in Sports

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Introduction

Risk taking in the work context may be considered part of an overall strategy for career advancement. The notion is that once a person has reached a certain level in their career they may need to take a risk in order to achieve long term goals. When pain and injury occur, the elite sporting participant has several options: to give up the sport; to let the body heal naturally with minimal medical intervention; or to actively rehabilitate the injured area with the advice of a sport medicine expert. Unfortunately, decisions with regard to what to do with an injured body are not always the concern simply of the sporting participant alone but may affect a large number of individuals within the participant's social network (Nixon 1992, 1993b).

Cultural Risk

It is Frey (1991) who first referred to the culture of risk in sport (1992, 1993a, b, 1996). Responses to risk are culturally specific, and because of this, an understanding of the habitus of sporting environments as highlighted earlier is of great importance when one is exploring risk in its cultural associations. Elite sporting participants may habitually respond to risk, which suggests that in the field of play, when their body is absent choices about risks and whether to take them may be unconscious. A fundamental component of the habitus of most elite sporting clubs is that players wish to perform to the best of their ability on every occasion and, as a result, train in order to achieve ever-greater levels of fitness, thus enhancing performance. Some athletes have been shown to be so physically fit that their immune system is suppressed (Shepherd and Shek 1994).

Risks by drugs

One of the most-discussed issues related to risk culture, and one that has been an area of considerable research, is the use of illicit performance enhancing substances (Laura and White 1991). It is well documented that sporting cultures such as body-bulding and the people involved in them are well aware of the risks that drug use entails (Klein 1995; Monaghan 2001), but the quest for the ideal body is all-consuming. One of the most problems lies within the philosophy of win at all costs, which has become an integral component of the sporting world as a result of the political values attached to sporting success and the role the mass media play in personifying them. Sporting administrators and those individuals increasingly in control of the lives of elite sporting performers for example agents, coaches are able to actively encourage a culture of risk.

Socialization and risk

Risk culture establishes a normalized response to pain and injury where the discomfort of the body and the choices that are made to heal it are seldom seen as risky. Work by Kotarba (1983) explored the cultured of sport and the idea of playing in pain, and how that impacts upon the individuals involved. A growing number of scholars have highlighted the impact that pain and injury have in sporting contexts (Nixon 1989, 1993a; Roderick et al. 2000; Walk 1997; Young 1993). The grip of risk culture is so strong that if you express concern regarding injury, you may become marginalized from the rest of the sporting community (Nixon 1993a, b). In fact, a sport that is more contact oriented may be more open about risk than one that is non-contact oriented may be more open about risk than one that is non-contact. It takes little or no time for an uneducated observer to establish that if you play rugby or ice hockey, you are going to risk both pain

and injury with every match. Some sports with heavy physical contact and with almost certain injurious outcomes reinforce and naturalize notions of masculinity that value physical dominance (White et al. 1995:158).

All professional sport clubs are run as corporations, and therefore members of the community can impact upon the club only if they are financial shareholders. The self-contained environment of the high-performance clubs is where risk culture in the sporting community lays its most solid foundation. Athletes may be willing to take great risks because in the short term they will be financially well rewarded. Nixon (1993a) has suggested that in the social environment of professional sports the issue of risk is often obscured, since elite sporting performers are aware that there are high-quality treatment facilities at their disposal. Of course, after the performer is no longer of value, the provision for treatment of injury will be removed.

Cycle of risk

Risks are taken by athletes in order that they may achieve the best levels of performance possible, but a risk that must be rationalized exists only in conjunction with pain an injury. Our observation indicate that once a player reaches a secure position at the elite level, a reliance on risk culture is minimized. Risk is a product of sporting participation , and is most apparent with the onset of pain and injury. What is most important, however , is that this risk, as highlighted by scholars such as Nixon (1972, 1993a,b), Young (1993) and White et al. (1995).

Conclusion

Risk culture is present in every level of sport, since injury does not just affect the elite. However, it takes on greater importance in the world of the elite professional, as a result of the greater investment in time and / or money being made in training for enhanced performance. While some of the risks of enhanced performance may be unconscious to sporting participants who are habitually trained to perform, they become objectified by the presence of pain and injury.

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