

Fear, the other face of elite sport

María Fernández Ostolaza

SUMMARY

This paper considers some observations about fears in the competitive sports world. Elite athletes face a large amount of pressure, being put into competitive situations; but it should be noted that many of these fears derive from psychical reasons and not sports-related causes necessarily.

Very different types of fears can be seen among different patients. These fears vary due to the diverse life experiences that individuals have been exposed to. Joyce McDougall analysed in *The Dead Father: On Early Psychic Trauma and its Relation to Disturbance in Sexual Identity* and in *Creative Activity* mental blocks in a patient who was a writer; we can see similar issues in other environments, such as the domain of sports.

Until now, psychoanalysis has not been overly concerned with the mental condition of athletes; as sports have been classically thought to be non-intellectual professions. Yet, an individuals' phobias are expressed within their immediate life, and therefore, the phobias of athletes manifest while they are participating in sports activities. For example, we will see the case of a young athlete after the strain of a traumatic immigration process.

1.

I am going to talk about psychoanalysis and sport. I have been involved in athletics my entire life. I have attended European and world championships as a gymnast and also the Olympic Games as a coach. After my athletic career my experience as a coach drove me to study psychology. I had so many deep questions about everything from retirement to injury to performance that I could not answer by myself.

There are few psychoanalytic articles about sport, but notably the first one was written by Helen Deutsch in 1926. In any case, why hasn't the field of psychoanalysis been interested in sport?

I think that psychoanalysis is very important in the athletic environment. In fact it's not only important but necessary –we need psychoanalysis. The athletic environment is full of dreams. Different people have varied desires; coaches,

parents, spectators,... A psychoanalyst knows that when we have a lot of wishes put together, it can be as fantastic as it is crazy. When we have all of these dreams mixed together we have to introduce thoughts to balance the feelings. Maybe in the distant past, –I am not sure– an athletic environment could have been a very good field to sublimate human aggression, like a chess game. Unfortunately, nowadays, it is not always so. Psychoanalysis is as necessary in athletics as it is in other domains.

Additionally, as psychoanalysts we shouldn't forget our subject matter; it is not to win gold medals, it is the study of the unconscious.

I have spent some years collaborating with The Spanish Athletics Council, where I coordinate two programs; the program of Retirement from Sport and the program of Protection of the Elite Minor Athlete. These two programs allow me to be in touch with different generations of elite athletes from the veterans to the youngest, and also with the different agents of the athlete's life; coaches, parents, teachers, doctors. Fortunately, many of them want to collaborate with us in our prevention goals. We work in groups, analyzing different elements of the athletic system, trying to understand better the relation between the athlete and the setting, but without forgetting that the best way to study the unconscious of the human is to get into his psyche reality. Thanks to these two programs I have heard some very interesting life stories that may be worth sharing with you today.

2.

In the opening lecture of the 2016 International Meeting of the IFPS in New York, we could have listened to an amazing interview with Mimi Lipson, a young American writer. I want to recall a couple of details. Mimi's parents tried to help the families that had migrated to Boston from Russia. Mimi told us about Tamerlán Tsarnayev, an adolescent who liked boxing, but who never joined the American Olympic Team. Although he had talent and he had won competitions, he never got the necessary immigration status to be able to participate in the Olympic Games. After undergoing a process of radicalization, Tamerlan sadly decided to involve himself in a different sporting event: he planned and executed the Boston

Marathon terrorist attack in 2013.

When I listened to that story I was reminded of some of the patients with whom I was working. They experienced difficulties but finally ended up with a better fate. It was in that moment that I decided to start working on this paper.

3.

If we want to speak about fear and sport, we have to get rid of the naive belief that athletes are braver than others. I don't think so. I have often found that their defenses are very well organized.

Frequently, I explain to the athlete that generally speaking, there are three chronological periods in our competitive careers; The first is characterized by an increase in unconscious performance; in the second period, performance hits a mental roadblock and then the athlete consults us; finally, after work on oneself, we see a high level of performance, now with a conscious understanding.

There are a lot of fears that involve athletes; the distinctive fears of development that all humans encounter, the fears from their psyche realities, inherited fears from their families, and also the fears of competition specific to sport. We shouldn't mix them up, but it is difficult not to. As writers express their fears in their novels, and painters in their paintings, athletes also reveal their fears in their performance. I have treated an athlete who believed he was afraid of doing a move within a competition when in fact the fear was to face his grandfather's death. Another patient had to consider many cultural fears, which originated in her father's ancestral thinking. I have treated such athletes, and also coaches and international judges or referees who had clinical anxiety in competition. In any case, one of the most frequent fears I've seen among athletes is the fear to lose their place in the ideal.

4.

I am going to tell you about Rachel's story. Rachel was an athlete who came to Spain when she was three years old. She came with her parents and her brother, leaving the rest of the family behind. She, only she, had gotten the Spanish Nationality, because she was an elite athlete. Rachel had a great talent, but she had been operated on five times in four years for different accidents while she was training or competing. She comes from a country with a great tradition in her sport. In the beginning her family had many economic difficulties, but they worked very hard and Rachel was able to be trained in the best Sports Club of Madrid. She was selected for the National Team really quickly.

On the other hand, she didn't believe I could be a good confidant because she didn't think that I would be able to understand her and to offer useful words. I was referred by her coach. Our first sessions were very difficult and we couldn't work together then. After seven weeks she called me again --nowadays I think with her

own demands-- because she had found a very good reason to work with me. She had begun a relationship with a boy who she loved a lot, but not everything was going well. After that moment and during two years, our work was possible thanks to her love story. She didn't like to talk to me about sport, nor the possibility of giving up the sport, nor about the Olympic Games where she would never go. But through the story of her boyfriend we would talk about her impulsiveness, her frustration, her desires -- desires which were different from those of others.

5.

When I work on a case like this usually I observe the parent's attitude about effort and sacrifice, because in sport it is very important to make a distinction between the two. In my opinion to make an effort requires one to put energy into a single goal, while sacrifice means to reject other things in favor of sport, other things that the athlete would also want. That being said, we can observe three possible attitudes from the parents:

- First the parents who say: *"Our daughter makes a major effort like us, like the members of this family; we are the type of family that works very hard"*.
- Second, the parents that say: *"Our daughter makes an extraordinary Effort; we are very proud. She makes us better, more unique. She adds character to our family". The prestige of having raised a great athlete makes them feel complete.*
- The third type, the parents who say: *"We don't understand how our daughter can do this level of work, we couldn't, so*



we feel a little guilty about that. Sport is very demanding and competitive. Sports are too exhausting."

So, we conclude that the family will be affected when the athlete wants to give up the sport, and this effect will be of critical importance in her own mind. These three types of ideas can lead to different processes of mourning. Certain parents can identify their losses and then distinguish between them and those of their daughter. That type of attitude makes it easier to decide whether or not to leave the sport – it makes the decision legitimate.

But, unfortunately, we know there are some families going through a very difficult process of mourning, for example, the grief of immigrants who have left their country of origin. We can see some cases where the retirement of sport could also be the end of the substitute identity which has held the family in an acceptable place in the social hierarchy. When the daughter leaves the sport and the rest of the family loses the status, it seems that the arrival to the national team represents, aside from winning titles and victories, their ticket into the territory and pathway to citizen rights. We can't forget that when the athlete arrives to the National Team they start the process TO gain citizenship. The retirement can reactivate the pain of grief caused by the loss of the country of origine.

Working with athletes, a group of people that constantly lives on the edge of winning or losing, it is very necessary to offer the option to talk about losses, both, Without a doubt offering this option makes the grief easier.

I am going to return to Rachel's story for a moment. For a long time she couldn't say a word about her retirement. I could see that her sport didn't interest her at all: neither her recovery nor competitions. Freud said symptom was the best compromising solution— Injury is frequently a

neurotic symptom in athletes, and in this case relapses and her slow recuperation were a sign of that.

In fact, she wanted to gain the needed time to break away from her family, to separate her new life from her family'S desires. As soon as she could conquer love which is obviously a personal conquest, then she could start to talk about losses: her own losses, but also familial losses.

6.

Finally, I would like to present another small clinical vignette. It is about Nico a teenager who arrived to the National Team as a minor, and who also left his country of origin when HE was a child. But there are some differences: Nico didn't know anything about the country he was born in, because he associated it with his stepfather, a violent person who Nico detested. Nico never met his biological father. Nico's mother, whom Nico adored, almost never talked about him, but Nico never protested.

In the beginning, I met Nico working in a group. While one year I could see how Nico suffered, but again I had to wait.

Curiously, Nico asked me to help because he was falling in love with a girl who lived far away from him, and Nico couldn't handle the separation every weekend. But at the same time he couldn't face with courage the athletic competition. Those two issues made him feel weak.

Thinking about these two cases we can conclude that adolescents don't ask for help from adults, they don't consider that possibility -- and much less if we are talking teenage athletes. ¿Why? Because the ideal image of an athlete is the image of a strong person, brave, who is able to do everything, a role model. So if we want to help them we have to stay there, patiently, ready to take the opportunity, and, over all, ready to listen to their demands. We should listen to each one.

As we have seen, the fear to lose the ideal is associated with the fear of speaking. Well, talking about the fear of speaking I have remembered a poem from León Felipe, a great Spanish writer from the early 20th Century. I am going to finish this paper with a free translation of that short poem:

*I don't know much, that's true.
I speak only of what I've seen.
And I've seen:
tales, rocking the cradle of man,
tales, drowning the anguished cries of man,
tales, stanching the weeping of man,
tales, burying the bones of man, and the fear of man...
creating all the tales.
I don't know much, that is true,
but all the tales have brought me sleep...
and I know all the tales.*

Traducción del poema: Marcelo Mareque

Referencias bibliográficas:

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María Fernández Ostolaza: University Degree in History and Psychology. Masters in Theory of Culture and Psychoanalysis (Universidad Complutense de Madrid). Psychoanalyst at the Centro Psicoanalítico de Madrid.

Works as a psychotherapist, combining her private practice with consulting work for different organizations. She is in charge of the psychology area of the Programa de Atención al Deportista, of the Consejo Superior de Deportes, in Spain. There she coordinates the program of Retirement from Sport and also the program of Protection to the Elite Youth Athlete.

She was an elite athlete herself and National Coach of the Spanish Rhythmic Gymnastics Olympic Team. 🌟