My story in elite sports

I was a top-level athlete for 6 years between the ages of 12 and 18. I practiced rhythmic gymnastics as part of a team, and on the surface everything seemed to be going well. We took part in world championships and achieved good results. As the years went by, my condition deteriorated until it became unbearable, leading me to stop my sport for good. This was followed by serious consequences and long years of reconstruction, which I am detailing below. In the end, these years of top-level sport have taken their toll on me, and I would like to share with you some of the factors which, in my opinion, predisposed me to fragility:

- Isolation – being physically far from my family and my social network.
- Poor or non-existent medical, psychological and nutritional follow-up.
- The practice of an aesthetic sport, which inevitably demands specific criteria of physical appearance and weight.
- A controlled, closed environment: no privacy allowed, controlled contact with the outside world.
- Normalization of violence, pain and suffering.
- The usual communication with coaches was through threats, blackmailing and orders.
- Physical and psychological exhaustion and failure to respect recovery periods.

All these added elements created an unfavorable environment for the athlete's well-being. It may be obvious, but I think it is necessary to pay attention to each of them, because each single element has the potential to threaten the athlete's psycho-corporal and emotional balance. It is therefore important to observe and question the athlete's entourage, so as to be able to identify areas of fragility and prevent the possible negative consequences.

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The consequences of a toxic sports environment

Feeling a deep sense of unease when the time came to terminate my contract as a woman athlete, I was actually immediately relieved, thinking that everything would go back to normal. But little did I know that this was just the tip of the iceberg. The impact of these long years of abuse was dramatic for my psychological, physical, social and emotional health. It took courage, resilience and the support of health professionals to heal and reconstruct myself over a period of 5 years. These are the consequences that have had a direct impact on me: I suffered from depression, suicide attempts, eating disorders (anorexia and then bulimia), generalized anxiety disorder and sleep disorders.

It is precisely to prevent this and protect athletes from such risks that I share my experience here.

What I really needed at the time: a message to healthcare professionals

One of the most important things for me is to understand the athlete. How often have I said or thought “nobody understands me”, because it's hard to imagine such a lifestyle and such conditions. Elite sport involves experiencing some extremely strong emotions, which are difficult to put into words. But elite sport is also about self-sacrifice, a world that revolves around a single goal and date, a specific diet, special bonds with team-mates... and many other unusual things. So first and foremost, if prevention and support for the athlete's overall well-being are to be achieved, a good relationship made of trust needs to be established, and an understanding of the athlete's environment, specific sport and its issues needs to be present. A healthcare paractitioner who meets with coaches, who knows them, who visits them and who has a well-founded representation of the athlete's reality, that's what I badly needed. Someone
who understands me, a resource and a safety net capable of preventing my collapse. In
addition, and as far as I'm concerned – and I think this is the case for many athletes – sport
has taught me perseverance, how to surpass myself, but also how to desire to succeed alone...
Indeed, it's not easy for an athlete to ask for help, or to spontaneously talk about what is going
wrong. The athlete's modus operandi may be to close in on him/herself, wanting to be left to
cope alone.
My advice would be to ask the athlete about sleep, nutrition, morale, motivation and social and
family life, as these can be revealing. As we know, the psychological aspects can have an
impact on the physical, and vice-versa. It is in my opinion necessary to take care of the
individual as a whole. By asking him/her precise questions and asking for detailed answers, by
showing interest and empathy, the athlete in pain is more likely to open up and let
himself/herself be helped. Without trivializing some of the information received, sometimes to
reassure or play down the situation, some professionals normalize the lack of sleep, motivation
or appetite. This is not okay, as it denies the individual's suffering and creates a skewed
representation of well-being. Instead, informing him/her of the possible risks, of your concern,
of the fact that you care about his/her health, and proposing a little more regular follow-up
could help a lot.
With that, I would have needed a space with guaranteed confidentiality. A space where it is
said loud and clear that I am safe, and that nothing discussed will cross these walls without my
consent. Even if this is obvious for some professionals, as an athlete I remember always feeling
that everything would be passed on to my coach. This automatically put me in a relationship of
insecurity and mistrust with the carer, limiting my readiness to share my suffering.

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What I really also needed was for healthcare professionals to validate my emotional
experience rather than give advice. Let them hear and legitimize my emotions, my pain, my
fears, let them tell me that it is understandable to feel that way in this context, but that this
state is not normal and that they are going to help me get out of it.
Finally, I would like to emphasize one important thing: when an athlete opens up in full
confidence and it is not taken seriously or nothing happens afterwards, that athlete will never
trust you again. The effort of sharing something so meaningful and deep being too great and
the result so inconclusive, they will decide that it is better to keep it to themselves. This is a
classic mechanism among abuse victims. By taking the athlete seriously, intervening and
accompanying him/her, you can make a difference.

Correspondence
Marine Winkelmann, member of the Swiss rhythmic gymnastics national team from 2005 to 2012