

Commonwealth Games injuries highlight a problematic culture in elite sports

Written by Jack Hynes, PhD student, Victoria University

New Zealand weightlifter [Laurel Hubbard suffered a career-ending elbow injury](#) during the Commonwealth Games. Australia's [Francois Etoundi was also injured](#), but continued to compete and won a bronze medal. Welsh competitor [Joshua Parry collapsed](#) during his attempt at lifting 160kg.

These incidents are a symptom of a [belief](#) that athletes should stop at nothing to achieve success. The idea is that athletes must make sacrifices, take risks, and strive for distinction.

Strict adherence to these values can have negative health outcomes. Yet people who behave in a manner consistent with these values are usually celebrated and held up as role models.

After Etoundi dropped the bar and collapsed in distress, for example, commentator and two-time Commonwealth Games weightlifting champion Michaela Breeze [said](#) :

Well he is in a fair amount of pain by the looks of it, but you know what, the good news is that was his last attempt – it doesn't matter...

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Joshua Parry collapsed violently just before he could lift the weight above his head. Similarly, [I vorn McKnee collapsed](#) from a lack of oxygen during his lift.

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The commentators had mixed reactions on both occasions. For Breeze, the event was normal and she [reassured viewers](#) that the athlete was “absolutely fine”. She explained why the lifters lost oxygen and provided acute recovery advice (take the belt off, feet up, and so on).

In both cases, the lifters were accompanied off the stage by medical staff.

This reflects the kind of values that are promoted and taught to athletes in high-performance sport. In a [seminal study](#), researchers Robert Hughes and Jay Coakley coined the term “sport ethic” to refer to a set of criteria necessary to be a “real athlete”.

Athletes are expected to sacrifice other areas of their life and commit themselves fully to their sporting pursuit. They place the demands of the sport or team above their own and are expected to dedicate their lives to self-improvement and push the limits.

There are inherent health risks in sport, but facing up to them voluntarily is viewed as courageous. “Real” athletes are expected not to back down from challenges or external pressure. They take full responsibility for achieving their pursuits and believe anything is possible if they try hard enough.

However, as we have seen with the recent spate of injuries to weightlifters, athletes who compete through pain and refuse to accept limits can put their health at risk.

Media commentary often normalises injuries as part of the sport. Playing through pain and injury is not exclusive to weightlifting; rather, it is common practice in a [range of sports](#) as (aspiring) athletes place the demands of the sport above themselves.

Read more: [Explainer: what is pain and what is happening when we feel it?](#)

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It was [recently revealed](#) that tennis star Rafael Nadal has been “living with pain and painkillers” for more than a decade.

Nadal’s case shows how injured athletes face considerable pressure to return from injury quickly, or to compete even when hurt.

Ignoring injuries and playing through pain, often with the help of medical strategies, is a major aspect of how athletes are [socialised](#) – even if it is at the expense of their long-term health and well-being.

But physical injury is not the only risk of conforming to these values. Athletes who commit solely to their sporting involvement over long periods [may experience](#) burnout, or fail to develop meaningful ways of interacting with the world and other people. This presents problems for career transitions such as retirement.

While this issue is prevalent in elite sport it is often individualised - we concentrate on specific athletes or events. The result is commentary that merely seeks to describe the incidents without attempting to understand them in light of the broader social and cultural context.

Values trickle down

Conformity to the sport ethic starts with children from a young age. Through participation in recreational sport and interactions with others they may adopt certain beliefs, values and behaviours.

As children continue participating and grow older there is an [increased emphasis](#) placed on performance, even in recreational sport. Sport may have been a venue for play and enjoyment, but the lessons of professional sport have trickled down to children.

Many of the beliefs and values that shape over-conformity to the sport ethic are gradually learned and adopted by those aspiring to become elite athletes.

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The Commonwealth Games offer an opportunity to rethink the process of becoming an elite athlete and longer-term health outcomes. Through gaining a greater awareness and understanding of this process we can shape sports as an avenue for developing young people in their entirety, not just for sport performance.

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