

*Within*) wrote that, “Heroes take journeys, confront dragons, and discover the treasure of their true selves.” Karen wants to share her journey with others, and I have helped by writing this article. Karen is my hero, for she has set up blazing torches in dark streets to see by!

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## **Sports Heroes and Mental Health Problems**

**Stanley H. Teitelbaum**—Postgraduate Center for Mental Health

Professional athletes are no strangers to mental health problems, but the recognition, acknowledgment, and acceptance of these issues has been extraordinarily slow. The lack of public awareness, the macho sports culture, and the disdainful attitude of the sports leagues toward emotionally challenged players have contributed to this dilemma. The spectrum of mental health problems among professional athletes runs the gamut from anxiety, depression, narcissism,

paranoia, bipolar disorder, dissociative identity disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, adjustment disorder, and antisocial personality disorder. In recent times a cluster of athletes including football players Terry Bradshaw, Herschel Walker, and Ricky Williams have been openly discussing their mental health problems, which reflects a step toward significant progress in this area.

Some sports heroes have contended with longstanding emotional disorders, while for others, it is the pressures that accompany being a sports celebrity that puts them at risk for developing mental health problems. Once an athlete arrives on the big stage, the pressures of maintaining peak performance and living up to the expectations of idealizing fans living vicariously through their heroes' accomplishments, can be intense and take a toll on mental stability.

In the former category are baseball legends Tyrus Raymond ("Ty") Cobb (1886-1961) and James Anthony ("Jimmy") Piersall (1929-). At the beginning of his career Cobb was traumatized by the murder of his revered father at the hands of his mother, who shot him after mistakenly thinking he was a prowler in her bedroom. Cobb suffered from delusions of persecution and his earlier tendencies toward violent acting out were exacerbated by this horrendous trauma. His biographer, Al Stump, described him as a paranoid schizophrenic who played baseball as if a cadre of enemies attempting to annihilate him were in pursuit (Stump, *Cobb: A Biography*, 1994, p. 298).

Jimmy Piersall is remembered as a baseball player who, five decades ago, entertained the Boston Red Sox's Fenway Park fans with comic actions such as hula dancing while playing the outfield, squirting a water pistol on home plate, pretending to hitchhike a ride on the cart escorting relief pitchers, and running the bases backwards after hitting a home run. The crowds grooved on his weird behavior, which

was precipitated by the manic side of his bipolar condition. What seemed funny was actually sad, but the public was unaware of its source. Nowadays, we can readily identify and successfully treat people with bipolar disorders; but in Piersall's era, it was not easily diagnosed. *Fear Strikes Out*, a 1957 movie about his life, highlighted the resistance of athletes and baseball culture to psychotherapy, while exploring the roots of their emotional issues. A key scene takes place in a mental hospital between Piersall and his psychiatrist. In the session, the therapist is trying to get Piersall to examine the effect of his harsh father as a factor in his emotional breakdown. However, the baseball player, embracing the defense mechanism of denial, exasperatingly shouts out, "If it wasn't for my father, I wouldn't be where I am today!" The camera then pans the barren gray walls of the room, and the scene ends.

Many sports stars have been catered to since they were eight years old, when they first displayed their athletic prowess and, as a result, their personality growth has been stunted. It is our need to anoint sports heroes, so that we can identify with them and feel like winners when they excel. Essentially, our society is creating a climate in which it is difficult for celebrity athletes not to become narcissistic.

In doing so, we are conditioning them to acquire what I refer to as the "toxic athlete profile," in which arrogance, grandiosity, and entitlement become central personality characteristics. They grow up with an exaggerated sense of their importance and function in an unreal celebrity bubble in which they are adored for their performance. As a result, there are often serious gaps in the development of a cluster of dimensions that are essential for mature functioning. These gaps include lapses in reality testing, deficiencies in judgment, poor frustration tolerance, difficulty postponing gratification, a compromised capacity for empathy, and a limited ability to engage in reciprocal relationships. Professional

athletes are particularly susceptible to adjustment disorders after they retire from active involvement in the game. The statistics for separation and divorce are staggeringly high, especially in the first 18 months after retirement, and the rate of suicide within 10 years of retirement as an active player is also alarmingly high (Teitelbaum, *Sports Heroes, Fallen Idols*, 2005, pp. 205, 30).

The relationship between personal stress and performance is intriguing. By most accounts, increments in stress have a negative impact on the level of performance. For example, John Daly's golf game seemed to deteriorate when he was under severe marital stress. Tiger Woods's not making the cut in a major tournament in 2006 was widely attributed to the stress of his father's death. In view of the monumental emotional toll the recent scandal has inevitably had on Tiger Woods, it will be interesting to see how he performs when he returns to the tour. Ironically, some sports stars have acquired adaptive defense mechanisms, like compartmentalization, which allows them to separate the more stressful sectors of their lives from their athletic performance, which remains unaffected and may even become enhanced. For example, when Pete Rose was served with divorce papers in what promised to be a highly contentious situation, his batting productivity accelerated, and he rose to the occasion by getting 60 base hits over the next month. Sometimes one can focus more intensely on succeeding in one area of life, while feeling vulnerable and threatened in another sector. The interaction between stress and performance can play out in either direction.

Sports stars traditionally have been loathe to accept their mental health problems because they function in a culture of machismo where such afflictions are considered to be a sign of weakness and softness in place of a gladiator image of toughness. These disorders are usually accompanied with feelings of shame and embarrassment. For decades, players

have tended not to be supportive or understanding when a teammate succumbs to a mental health disorder. When football star Barret Robbins disappeared under the sway of a bipolar episode just prior to the Super Bowl game in 2003, it became a distraction for the Oakland Raiders. The Raiders were handily defeated the next day by the Tampa Bay Buccaneers and Robbins' fellow players expressed resentment rather than sympathy toward his plight. Teammate Mo Collins expressed the general antipathy toward Robbins by stating, "Whatever rock he came up from, he can stay there as far as I'm concerned." The problem is further compounded by the major sports league establishments, which often adopt prejudicial approaches toward mental health issues, demonstrate an attitude of disdain toward these problems, and view them as something to will yourself out of, to shake off and get over, rather than as something which requires understanding and professional counseling. In a typical example of this insensitive mentality, New York Mets pitcher Pete Harnisch claims that when he confided in his manager about his debilitating symptoms, which were interfering with his effectiveness and were clear but unrecognized signs of depression, he was told that he was "gutless."

Fortunately, since the Robbins and Harnisch episodes, the landscape is changing in the sports world toward a greater acceptance of mental health problems. No longer are players, teammates, and management automatically reacting to these issues as a sign of weakness. The progress is especially apparent in Major League Baseball where All Stars such as Dontrelle Willis and Josh Hamilton were challenged in the 2009 season by anxiety and alcohol addiction relapse, respectively. Zach Greinke, despite his struggle with depression and social anxiety disorder, became the American League Cy Young Award winner.

It is commendable that sports heroes speak out. Terry Bradshaw talks out about his depression, Ricky Williams dis-

cussed his social anxiety disorder on the interview program, "60 Minutes," and Herschel Walker wrote a book about his battle with dissociative identity disorder. Additionally, Major League teams are granting players time off to deal with personal issues. Hopefully, we are entering an era in which such afflictions are increasingly de-stigmatized and are viewed and responded to with compassion and assistance.

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## **Voltaire: An Adored, Un-Heroic National Hero**

**Alexander J. Nemeth**—Kaiser Medical Center

Preoccupied with his own glory as a young playwright, there was hardly a single heroic bone in the body of François-Marie Arouet (1694-1778), known later by the pseudonym Voltaire. Already, in his teens, one can find a tendency to stay out of his strict father's reach as much as he could. Friends of the family, with estates and chateaux in the vicinity of Paris, would not mind having the precocious, intellectually curious youngster around for weeks at a time. Like the Marquis de Saint Ange, Louis Urban de Caumartin, formerly a prominent statesman at the court of Louis XIV, served as a precious source of knowledge in French history for young Arouet. The history of civil war and bloody religious conflict, particularly in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, fascinated him. In fact, it laid the ground for Voltaire's grand epic, *La Henriade*.

During the long years of tug-of-war between father