

Maddie Toombs

The Virtue of Vulnerability

Almost every single child has an athletic idol, someone in their sport that they look up to and want to be. Gymnasts look up to Simone Biles, basketball players to LeBron James or Michael Jordan, and for many skiers Lindsey Vonn and Mikaela Shiffrin are the women young skiers want to be. We think of these athletes as invincible, and in the case that they do get knocked down, they get right back up. They rarely take a second glance at their injuries. They power through injury, no matter how serious.

One sport specifically, ice hockey, is especially known for its intensity and pace of play. Because of the intensity of the game, you often see players getting injured on the ice, varying from a sprained ankle to a concussion or even a career-ending knee injury. Most of these injuries (up to 88.7% according to a study that included over 1600 players over a total of six National Hockey League (NHL) seasons published in the British Journal of Sports Medicine) occurred on the ice in a game. The leading types of injuries in this study were head (17%), thigh (14%), and knee (13%) (McKay et al). But the most striking finding of this study was that there were over 5000 time-loss injuries over the span of the six seasons in the participants of the study. This means that there were roughly 800 injuries per season, and this was just among the participants of the study (there are roughly 900 players in any given season and the number of players involved in the study ranged from 837 players to 895 players). It's an interesting thought that most players get injured at least once every season. Granted the injury sustained could be a muscle strain that doesn't take long to heal, but an injury is an injury nonetheless.

At the end of every season, teams release lists of players that sustained injuries during their playoff runs. After the Stanley Cup was awarded to the Tampa Bay Lightning this year, the Dallas Stars, winners of the Western Conference Championship, released their injury list. And boy, was it extensive.

The two big injuries were goalie Ben Bishop's torn meniscus that made him unfit to play during the playoffs and Tyler Seguin's serious injuries that caused him to miss the beginning of the Stars' playoff run. Seguin, a Center and Alternate Captain for the Texas-based team, had suffered from knee problems before the season was paused due to COVID-19 back in March, and also tore his labrum in his hip, according to James O'Brien of NBC Sports who reported on the Stars' 13 player long injury list (O'Brien). In early November, Seguin underwent surgery to repair his hip injury and is expected to be recovering for at least the next five months. Seguin, while a phenomenal player, fell victim to the "play through the pain" mentality that is common in sports, especially ice hockey.

Ice hockey players often continue to play even when injured. "A lot of it was me not wanting to give up my spot on the team," says former ice hockey goalie Mark Toombs when asked about playing through the pain. Over the course of his career, which included playing a year of junior hockey after high school for the Madison Capitols, Toombs said he experienced a myriad of injuries, including a concussion, sprained ankle, torn quadricep, a broken pinky, and various other injuries. "I played through all of them," Toombs commented. "I didn't play through the concussion or torn quadricep, they didn't let me. Otherwise I would have tried" (Toombs).

As an outsider, it may seem strange. Why would someone continue to play when they know that the smart choice would be to sit out and heal? Ultimately, it's the player's choice. Oftentimes, injuries go unreported due to pride and wanting to stay in your spot in the lineup. The thing about hockey is that there are three lines, or groups of players, for both forwards (offense) and defensemen. In a sense, you're replaceable. If you're the first line center, your second line guy can move up to your spot if you get injured. And what if they proved to be better than you? You'd be moved down to a lower line or even benched or healthy scratched. It's a game of pride. But is maintaining your pride worth further injuring yourself or becoming dependent on painkillers to survive even a practice?

Yes, dependency on painkillers is something that's talked about often. However, what's not being talked about is the dangers of using these drugs. "Zero education and zero knowledge" says Kyle Quincey, former NHL player (NHLer) who was interviewed as part of a TSN exposé on the use of

painkillers in the league (Westhead). “No one is telling us what this pill does.” These painkillers, more specifically a drug called Toradol, can be extremely detrimental to one’s health if not used properly. The recommended usage of Toradol is limited. One shouldn’t use it for more than five days or to manage chronic pain. However, what we’re finding out about extended usage of painkillers is that players end up needing them more and more often. This can often lead to other problems, including but not limited to internal bleeding, kidney problems, or even Chron’s disease as mentioned by former NHLer Ryan Kesler who took Toradol shots to manage his injuries (Westhead).

Something important to mention about the use of painkillers is that the athletes who use them use them in order to mask the pain of their injuries. The professional athletics world is one that looks down on vulnerability or admitting weakness. I guess in the mind of an athlete, admitting to a weakness gives your opponent a way to take you down. In a sport like hockey, if your opponent knows your weaknesses, whether it be a part of the game you don’t necessarily excel in or a weakness in one’s personal life, it can lead to a loss for your team or cheap shots that could get you in trouble. This creates a dangerous mentality of “If I don’t play, I’m weak. I need to play.” It leads players to put themselves in dangerous situations, both physically and mentally.

Toombs, who played through a sprained (almost broken) ankle, fell prey to this mentality. “When I took off my skate, I couldn’t walk,” Toombs explains. “I just tied the skates tighter so I could keep the swelling down.” Could that injury have led to something worse? What started as a sprain could have easily become something more serious, just because he felt like he was letting his team down or in jeopardy of losing his place on the team (Toombs). And that thought hasn’t changed in the thirty years since Toombs hung up the skates. This issue is prevalent in hockey today, especially at upper levels, according to Concordia College women’s hockey goalie, Becca Macklin. While Macklin has not played through an injury herself, she has seen her own teammates continue to play. She explained that the athletic trainers make themselves available to the players should they need the services of the training staff (Macklin). However, according to Toombs, a lot of the time, injuries go unreported. The culture of hockey has made it so that players don’t report their injuries due to the fact that they would have to let

down their guard, sit out, and take the time to let their injuries heal. Any reasonable athletic trainer would make a recommendation to sit out and let injuries heal, even if it was just a pulled muscle. In turn, players avoid the trainers unless absolutely necessary, in fear that they would be forced to sit out.

What this really boils down to is toxic masculinity and the issue of not being allowed to be vulnerable. We all have the idea of an athlete in mind. They exude toughness and grit and the strength to power through adversity. They are the face of brands like Nike and Under Armour. They are respected for their willingness to keep going. But what we don't see is the availability of athletes to be vulnerable and let their guard down. Any hockey fan might remember when Boston Bruins captain Zdeno Chara took a puck to the face in the 2019 Stanley Cup Playoffs. He was praised for his return the game directly after the injury occurred. While he may have had a new face shield, or "fish bowl" as a fan may call it, Chara was still pretty beaten and bloodied up when he was on the starting lineup that night. Yes, you read correctly. Not only did Chara only miss minutes of a game and return two nights later for the next game, but also was on the starting lineup for the Bruins upon his return. Was he not concerned that he could split his stitches? Or that maybe he should take the time to heal properly? Most likely not. His thought process was most likely that he couldn't let his team down in perhaps one of the biggest games of the season. So, he did what he felt he had to do, which was take painkillers for the pain he was experiencing from the injury, add another layer of protection, and get back out on the ice, even if it was safer to sit out.

What oftentimes gets ignored is the player's attitude towards painkillers. It's abundantly clear that players will do whatever they can to get back on the ice. That is just the mentality of these players. While it is safe to say that the education on painkillers is lacking in the world of professional athletics, we still see players that rely heavily on painkillers. Ryan Kesler, who most recently played for the Vancouver Canucks of the NHL, told TSN that he relied on these meds to even get through a practice at the end of his career. He had built up such a tolerance and reliance on medication, that even to get through a day and survive pain wise, he *needed* to take medication that was by no means meant for regular use (Westhead). This puts our athletes in incredibly dangerous situations.

Physical pain isn't the only kind of pain that athletes continue to play through. Colin Wilson, who retired from the NHL after playing in the league for 10 years, detailed his experience playing with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) throughout his career in a piece published in *The Player's Tribune* this past October. He also claimed that he suffered from alcoholism and substance abuse (he took medicines, Xanax and Seroquel specifically, for his OCD) and that, coupled with his OCD, "I found rock bottom" (Wilson). This only further proves that NHLers have more mental health issues that we don't know about. It all goes back to not wanting to seem weak or vulnerable. But sometimes asking for help and admitting to your weaknesses makes you strong. It takes tremendous courage and knowledge of oneself to ask for help, especially when you're looked at as someone who exudes strength and grit and toughness. In a way, showing your weakness shows your strength.

We need to be more accepting of athletes showing their weaknesses. It would allow for a healthier league. We also need to keep in mind the influence that professional athletes have over the general population. Every young kid has an athletic idol, whether it be LeBron James (NBA), Simone Biles (Olympic Gymnast), Sidney Crosby (NHL), or some other professional athlete. Kids think they're cool and want to be just like them. Think of the good that expressing vulnerability could do for young athletes. Hearing someone they admire tell you that it's okay not to be okay; either mentally, physically, socially or emotionally, would really send the message home to young athletes. We would be able to change the toxic culture of sports and the need to play through any sort of pain you may have to play through

It's clear that there needs to be some sort of change in the culture of athletics in general, not just the sport of ice hockey. We need to be responsible for athletes that have healthy minds, bodies, and spirits. We shouldn't continue to support a culture that implicitly encourages athletes to play through all sorts of pain and not expose a single weakness. It is not healthy. It is not beneficial. It does nothing for the players. So the call to action is this: allow yourself to show your weaknesses, it only makes you stronger.

Works Cited

Macklin, Becca. FaceTime Interview. 10 Nov. 2020.

I interviewed Becca Macklin, goalie for Concordia College-Moorhead Women's Hockey, about her experience with playing through the pain. It was an interesting conversation about the culture of today compared to my interview with Toombs. It also detailed the differences between the cultures of men's and women's hockey, which have different outlooks on pain and playing through it.

McKay CD, Tufts RJ, Shaffer B, *et al* "The epidemiology of professional ice hockey injuries: a prospective report of six NHL seasons." *British Journal of Sports Medicine* 2014;**48**:57-62.

This was a study that dealt with the injuries incurred by NHL players over six seasons. I thought it was good to include in my essay to back up the types and amount of injuries. It could give a good insight into how often players get injured, even though the study concluded in 2012 and was published in 2014.

O'Brien, James. "Big Dallas Stars Injury List from Playoff Run: ProHockeyTalk: NBC Sports." *ProHockeyTalk | NBC Sports*, NBC Sports, 11 Oct. 2020, nhl.nbc.com/2020/10/08/stars-share-staggering-injury-list-from-stanley-cup-final-run/.

This article, while brief, carries a lot of weight. It details the list of injuries that the Dallas Stars' General Manager (GM) Jim Nill released in a press conference following the conclusion of the 2019-20 NHL season.

The list includes 13 players, ranging from Alternate Captain Tyler Seguin to goalie Ben Bishop to star goalie Anton Khudobin. Some players are expected to make a full recovery before the start of the 2020-21 season, date TBD, but others are expected to miss the first few games up to the first few weeks of the season.

Most of the players mentioned in this list, with the exception of goalie Ben Bishop, played through their injuries as the Stars advanced to the Stanley Cup Final, ultimately losing in Game 6 to the Tampa Bay Lightning. This source gives great insight into the injured list of just one team in particular. It also implies that teams could see quite a few injuries that were played through, not just players on the Stars.

Toombs, Mark. FaceTime Interview. 11 Nov. 2020.

I interviewed my father, Mark Toombs, who played goalie for the Rosemount High School hockey team, as well as the Madison Capitols of the United States Hockey League (USHL) for a year after high school. He gave great insight as to what it was like to play through injury in the 1980s and how that culture has changed since then. He also talked about his own experiences.

Westhead, Rick, and Matt Cade. "TSN Original: The Problem of Pain." *TSN*, Sept. 2020, www.tsn.ca/video/tsn-original-the-problem-of-pain~2040291.

This was a super interesting video produced by TSN, Canada's version of ESPN, about the painkillers that NHL players use. They interviewed former NHLers Kyle Quincey (most recently playing for MIN), Ryan Kesler (most recently playing for ANA), and Zenon Konopka (most recently playing for BUF); as well as doctors, agents, and personal trainers involved in the NHL.

It was a very eye opening expose on the world of the NHL. The major topic of discussion was the dangers of the painkillers that NHL players use to manage pain. A lot of it comes about because of the "toughness" and "ability to play through injury" that NHLers have. It's almost an expectation that NHL players do whatever they can in order to get back on the ice as soon as possible. That's not to say that players don't miss games, but a lot of players seem to "bounce back" quickly after injury, sometimes before the end of a game.

Experts in the video made some pretty striking accusations against the League, and players expressed a need for change in the administration of painkillers and the education involved, as well as calling for change in the sponsorship of NHL teams by medical companies and hospitals.

Wilson, Colin. "The Things You Can't See." *The Players' Tribune*, The Players' Tribune, 29 Oct. 2020, www.theplayerstribune.com/posts/colin-wilson-nhl-hockey-mental-health.

This is a primary source from NHL player Colin Wilson, who is currently a free agent but most recently played for the Colorado Avalanche. Wilson detailed his experience of playing in the NHL while dealing with mental health issues stemming from his Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD).

This story, unlike the other sources, talked more about mental pain rather than physical pain. One of the things that I wanted to highlight in my essay was how men aren't really allowed to be vulnerable in a traditional sense. I think the same applies to athletes especially, who, because of their platform and profession, are supposed to be "tough" and masculine.