

The Agonies of Injury Management

By Leo Isaac

As a coach, I know that it is at best upsetting and at worst a depressive agony to experience an injury that limits your training especially as you approach an event which you perceive as important. But really, it is so unnecessary and so unhelpful to agonise.

Let's discuss what's really going on and how you can deal with injury much better.

Firstly, you simply have to accept that no matter what sport you play, it is likely that you will suffer injury. At least in Weightlifting the prevalence of injuries requiring hospitalisation or death are extremely low.

I know it's disappointing that just when everything seems to be going your way, you get some kind of injury. But think of this, just when things are going well and you are lifting some really impressive weights in training, is the time when you will be most susceptible to injury. It is almost a given that you cannot push your body to a higher capacity without some blowback.

Athletes consistently make the same mistakes, so I am really glad you are reading this! I am going to do my best in this short article to explain.

The type of injuries we get in weightlifting often don't stop you from training, well not a first they don't, they simply limit your training capacity. Typical injuries in Weightlifting frequently occur in the knee, wrist, hand, and shoulder, a sometimes in the lower back. Injuries occur because you are working hard, pushing yourself to new limits, and training with high frequency. This last factor is problematic because the more often you train, the less time your body has to repair damage done by training. This injury repair situation is made even worse if the athlete has insufficient sleep, nutrition and rest.

The first mistake that athletes typically make is to ignore the early signs of injury. There is some pain or discomfort, but it is not bad enough to prevent them from attempting to train normally. It's "the pain goes away when I warm up syndrome". I always say to the athlete words to the effect "if you are the least bit concerned, don't do the exercise, don't try to work through the pain". Usually my words have no effect.

This brings us to the second mistake. Athletes do not like to alter their training in any major way, for example reducing intensity on squats (because of knee issues) or snatches (because of wrist issues) for week to 50% of PB and then edging forward slowly to recovery. They will try to train on regardless of pain because they are always concerned that if they reduce training, they will become weaker. This is really illogical because pain becomes far more an inhibiting factor than loss of strength. It is almost always the case that the athlete on the day of the competition will always have sufficient strength even after they have had to make significant changes to training as a result of injury. The problem is more the *perception* of strength loss rather than the actuality.

The third mistake is failing to 'work around' the injury in training in a productive manner. So, your knees are sore, then reduce the loading on your knees by avoiding exercises that are bound to exacerbate the issue. This means you need to avoid full-depth squats, or lifts into bottom positions. If

your wrist is sore, for goodness sake don't snatch. Wrapping your wrist up won't make any difference. Instead do exercises that don't cause pain, that won't exacerbate the injury. If your knees are sore, then add in pulls from blocks, shoulder presses and good mornings. You can keep yourself very strong by doing this – not that you need to worry about this.

The fourth mistake is that the injured athletes constantly perform unhelpful mental gymnastics. By this I mean that the athlete is constantly making comparisons between their present capacity to perform and where they should be according to the program. Inevitably, comparisons of this nature set off alarm bells and the changed mental state is often far worse than the injury. It is probably for this reason, the need to reduce anxiety, that athletes are prone to do the wrong thing. The athlete would prefer to take training risks with an injury rather than do the right thing for the longer term.

I need to say to you, the athlete, that coaches also agonise over injuries. That's not because of the injury itself but because we must deal with the emotional effect that injuries have on you. Somehow we have to refocus the injured athlete back to training in a productive manner and away from "is my injury better yet, is my injury better yet, is my injury better yet" mentality.

Years ago, I formed an analogy that might help. Do you remember when you were a child and you grazed some part of your body and a scab formed? Perhaps you remember picking at the scab and exposing newly forming skin underneath and causing it to bleed. If you did this too often, the scab would take much longer to completely disappear. If you left it completely alone, it would fall off by itself in 10 days and you would be like new again.