

Sports is a half trillion dollar global industry, but who will rethink investing in athletes' healthcare and well-being?



At 17, Mary Cain was considered the fastest girl of her generation. The youngest American track-and-field athlete to make it to the World Championships, she then joined an elite training program by a leading sports brand in 2013. Her running career started to decline, however. [In November 2019](#), she recounted how she was “physically and emotionally abused” by the training methods, and even “broke five different bones” in the process. During this time, she did not have access to medical, nutritional, and psychological professionals outside of the team’s own.

It is an all-too-common story: We look up to athletes as some sort of superheroes--especially with their demonstrations of almost superhuman skills and feats. We idolize elite athletes and sports professionals--their names adorn our shoes, jackets, shirts, video games, sports drinks, and other apparel.

However, the stark reality is that beneath it all, athletics is a business. Athletes are individuals who are often overworked, underpaid--or worse, [unpaid as in the case of student athletes](#)--and often lack workers' compensation benefits. There is the immense pressure to stay competitive enough, but for every success story, there are even more potentially rising stars who are forever held back by the inability to recover from their injuries.

The global sports market was [\\$488 billion in 2018](#), and it is forecast to grow by 5.9 percent annually. This industry is composed of different types of athletics, including spectator sports and participatory sports. Professional leagues are the biggest contributors to this economy, while brands involving apparel, nutrition, events, and even gambling are also notable for this growth.

In many cases, the most basic unit of the athletics ecosystem is the athlete -- and unfortunately, we often overlook their well-being, focusing mostly on performance, earning capacity, and potential.

Athletics can be a challenging career, wherein athletes usually have a [peak period of around two to three years](#), during which they need to be able to make their mark on their sport. For professionals, it also means earning a significant income to have a stable future if and once they have gone past their prime. Improved training and recovery practices help in extending performance past their prime, however.

Unfortunately, injuries can be career-threatening or even career-ending. And the way healthcare is structured in the industry, the athletes' well-being is not always the top priority. In recent years, state regulators have even sought to [limit workers' compensation benefits](#) for athletes.

"Health education for athletes is poor -- many are left to blindly trust the team and medical staff. Many athletes just focus on their skills and don't question the recommendation," says Dr. Justin Lin, PT, DPT, MS, CSCS. "Sometimes they seek care because their teammate uses them or markets their physician better if they are to seek outside help."

Lin, who is also Chief Executive Officer and Clinician at [Rehab and Revive Physical Therapy](#), has observed that the current situation is biased toward team owners or management, and not exactly focused on giving the best care to athletes, especially those who are injured. For instance, team doctors may be internal employees -- and they cater more to the interest of the team's management rather than athlete.

Too much focus on the performance and entertainment side of athletics

Lin cites how the focus on performance -- without consideration for recovery -- can lead to a toxic environment for pro athletes. "There is a lot of power and trust by the athlete given to the recommendations of the strength coaches because the goal is to be bigger, faster, and

stronger,” he says. “If the rehab recommendation comes from these coaches who don’t have the qualification, then there is a lot of risk pushing the boundaries and livelihoods of the athletes. It comes down to empowerment through education. But who can they trust? Most athletes don’t inherently trust the medical world because they weren’t exposed to it as children.”

There is too much focus on the bottomline -- the business side of athletes being kept on the field, whether it’s jerseys or memorabilia getting sold. Thus, pro athletes could be forced to play, even when they are still in recovery. Many would seek outside help to get better quicker through a specialist that can address the causes and not just symptoms.

“At the end of the day, though sports are a form of entertainment, they are also business, and majority of the time you have to do what is best for you,” says Carlon Michael Brown, former professional basketball player (NBA G-League, 1st Division Israel, First Division Germany, German League BBL champion, and Eurocup) and current pro sports consultant.

He cites the “unrealistic expectations from fans and the media of a stereotypical basis of what/who/how athletes should be,” as well as an “unwritten and unspoken feeling that the teams/owners own the players and can do whatever they want with them/to them because they pay them.”

According to Brown, athletes are constantly under a lot of pressure to perform. “Addressing the mental side of the situation is the biggest key to having long term success as a professional athlete, then and only then can you properly address the physical aspect of mastering your body.”

The stigma behind recovery

“There are instances and speculations that teams’ doctors are controlled by management and don’t have the TRUE best interest of the full recovery of athletes,” Lin says. “For instance, pro basketball and baseball players and a myriad of other pro sports athletes being rushed back too quickly to just to be reinjured shortly after their return. What happens is that the trust is broken down and they may seek outside help,” says Lin.

He says there is a certain stigma to recovery, and some athletes would choose to live with pain just so they can save their careers. He cites [the case of Kawhi Leonard](#) as an example of how mismanagement of injuries can negatively impact careers and relationships.

“I’ve had professional athletes and agents tell me to not document on my Electronic Medical Records systems my care for fear of reprisal. Some athletes who are just trying to make the cut also may not even bring up an injury or say they are ok for fear of being demoted quickly because this is their one chance.”

Lin says that this culture is prevalent especially during draft season, wherein team attention (and earning potential) are favored toward higher draft choices vis-a-vis lower ones. Athletes who are in recovery [might have lower chances](#) of getting on their preferred teams or contracts.

In some cases, even the simple act of seeking outside help might be considered a breach of contract. Take the [case of Major League Baseball's Jacoby Ellsbury](#), whose team, the New York Yankees, is declining to pay \$26.2 million as remainder of his contract, due to an alleged unauthorized medical treatment, which is a violation of his contract.

Also consider the case of [the Mets' Yoenis Cespedes](#), who had a contract reduction due to a non sports-related injury putting a hold to his team participation. Teams usually consider this to be a gamble underwritten by insurance, but ultimately impacting the player's future in sport if an injury proves to be career-ending.

"There is a crazy stat that says 93% of players play with pain every single day, yet they have been so accustomed to this mindset of being psychically numb that they just get through," says Brown. "The way their contracts are set up and written, they honestly don't have great choices since the contracts are non-guaranteed."

Better standards in providing for athletes' well-being

"There should be one governing board for the protection of athletes and also to have the best interest of balancing ownership expectations on a quick and speedy but thorough recovery. There needs to be a medical advocate for athletes, or a team of medical specialists that provide proper checks-and-balances -- not one influenced by team owners. These reviews and investigations should be conducted in conjunction with the players associations and there should be repercussions to teams who don't abide," Lin says.

"Injured athletes are workman's compensation cases. They are injured on the job, and if they play in minor league sports or European ball, they don't get paid if they don't play with their lesser guaranteed contracts." Lin likens it to a trade or professional union: "It should be like OSHA and work hazards if team staff are poorly advising their athletes, stars or not. Everyone should be treated equally across the board -- it's just the right thing to do."

Brown agrees: "The best thing that can be done in order for athletes to have full confidence in the industry and with their health is to have constant open communication about this very critical issue. Not just with the training medical staff, but with, but an open dialogue format where players come together and share experiences and feedback."

He adds that a union could work: "Specifically, a union or players injury association that was globally recognized and followed."

Lin recommends better oversight and standard of practices. The aim here is to ensure athletes are in control of their well-being, and that their careers will not necessarily be compromised if they choose to focus on recovery rather than speed.

Lin concludes: “We also need to provide transparency to the athletes giving them two things: the opportunity to make choices and decisions and understand every ramification future and present should be allowed, and also the ability to seek outside second opinion advice on their own or have their agents seek out the right people without consequence or repercussions.”

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