

Hoops and Healing: The Use of Athletics for Youth Involved in Recovery

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The use of athletics and sports with people recovering from substance abuse disorders has been well documented. Athletics has many positive advantages that lend itself to addictions treatment. This paper discusses the concept of using sports to promote recovery involvement for African American youth from the viewpoint of a scholar-practitioner-athlete and a scholar-practitioner/former professional athlete. Drawing upon the addictions literature and experiences in athletics, youth programming and addictions, the authors discuss similarities between sports and recovery, and address the need for more sports programming with African American youth as a supplement to traditional treatment programs.

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When the Los Angeles Lakers became the 2009-2010 champions of the National Basketball Association, Ron Artest, a forward for the Lakers and 10 year NBA veteran, was interviewed on the court during the post-game celebration. Artest, when asked how he was feeling after winning the championship, replied “I want to thank my psychologist for helping me get here”. Artest disclosed something that is rare for professionals, let alone professional sports: that he needed professional help to assist in his professional life. Later, in an interview on ESPN’s outside the lines, Artest disclosed specifically how techniques learned in therapy helped him focus and remain calm when his emotions became unstable on the court. This example of the intersection between sports and mental health is often unexplored in the treatment world, particularly in substance abuse treatment.

Utilizing recreational activities for youth and adults involved in addictions treatment is not a new concept. Several programs throughout the country have utilized sports and fitness programs to promote holistic wellness among individuals recovering from substance abuse. Many programs include this type of recreation within their programs, scheduling time for program participants to “let steam off” and engage physical activities. Although the need for this is intuitive, many treatment programs do little to integrate activities that take place on the fields of play into treatment and after care planning. Sports are often looked at as ancillary to core treatment activities. Within the core activities of meeting attendance, relapse prevention, and group therapy, the opportunities for engaging program participants in treatment, goal setting, and aftercare planning utilizing sports is often lost. This paper seeks to advance the concept of treatment programs, recovery groups, community centers and the like, in encouraging sports and

athletics for youth recovery from substance abuse, from the perspective of two scholar-practitioners and athletes, one of which played in the professional ranks.

There has been some documentation concerning the benefit of sports for young people, including its influence on development, with self-esteem, leadership skills, and positive socialization (Stevenson, 2003). As sedentary lifestyles and poor eating habits have helped to increase the rate of obesity in the U.S., involvement in sports and athletics can be seen as an important attribute in maintaining a healthy lifestyle (Brownson et al., 2010). Beyond physical improvement, participating in athletics has also been shown to benefit social-emotional health and well-being, including helping learn how to handle frustration and become more empathic (Perry, 2004) and develop self-discipline and control (Duquin & Schroeder-Braun, 1996). Organizations that provide sports programming can also help reduce stigma associated with being involved in mental health or substance abuse programs.

Others have utilized sports to address trauma (Henley & Colliard, 2005), and to address aggression (Stevenson, 2003). Stevenson (2003) utilized an intervention entitled PLAAY that utilized basketball and martial arts, along with rites of passage programming to assist young people with developing positive aggression and decreasing frustration and inappropriate anger. In this regard, team sports can assist in providing opportunities for adolescents to work closely with adults and peers toward common goals and to foster collaboration, responsibility-taking, and self regulation at a developmental stage when these opportunities may be limited (Coakley, 1997; Fullinwider, 2004; Larson, 2000).

For example, in several urban cities, basketball leagues have developed where primarily recovering persons come together to compete and garner support for each other. In Philadelphia, the “Clean Machine” basketball team and the league that it is a part of have been in existence for over 20 years and offers new and long term persons in recovery the opportunity to engage in a basketball league, multi-city tournaments, and supportive camaraderie (White, 2011). These types of leagues are examples of how important it is for persons in recovery to find healthy activities with like-minded individuals. In Illinois, the Illinois Athletic Association (IAA) is an association of youth residential facilities in several states that encourage sports involvement through inter-agency team sports play, including basketball, volleyball, and soccer. The residential facilities populations range from young people dealing with substance abuse issues to developmental disabilities. The IAA encourages a high level of sportsmanship, and many organizations utilize the league and league-play as an opportunity to teach valuable behavior and cognitive skills while maintaining an atmosphere of fun and camaraderie, important aspects for the development of young people struggling to recover.

As treatment professionals and athletes, we have seen several similarities between the process of involvement in competitive sports and recovery. Many parallels can be drawn between the journey to a successful athletic career and the road to recovery from addiction. These include open-mindedness, discipline, time management, coaching/sponsorship, and learning from failure. We will now discuss each aspect as it relates to sports and recovery.

Open-mindedness

A favorite axiom in treatment and recovery is “new ideas cannot be grafted onto closed minds”. One of the more important aspects of early recovery is helping substance abusers move away from fixed ideas about their substance use and learning about the treatment and recovery process. This can include preconceived notions about life with their substance of choice and dealing with belief systems that inhibit personal growth. In order to develop athletically, one has to be able to learn from more experienced coaches and athletes concerning skills and techniques to become proficient in their respective sport. An individual has to come to the table aware that there are limitations in her/his skill-set, and can be improved with the assistance of coaches and professional staff.

Discipline

The development of discipline is an important part of early recovery. For many youth who enter treatment, there is a significant lack of internal discipline associated with basic life skills. Many youth come from unstructured environments where they are not use to setting goals and practicing discipline in order to achieve them. Recovery programs often assist youth in learning how to develop appropriate life skills in order to exercise discipline associated with day-to-day tasks.

Time management

Participants in both arenas quality of life depends on their adherence to time management. Most athletes learn very quickly or within the first few days of their introduction to sports how tantamount their management of time becomes. A disciplined routine is prominent throughout sports and athletics and is why every coach creates a

daily time log (stretch 10-10:15, layups 10:15-10:25 etc.). This regimented behavior creates order, a sense of purpose, and something to look forward to, as well as a beginning, middle, and end.

Time management in recovery is similar. Recovery has to have order, something that has been absent in active addiction. The addict has to develop new routines that create positive occurrences and actions to support those occurrences. Having a sense of purpose for an addict is analogous to a chef with a new restaurant. He/She can create anything they want. The addict can transform their life into something new. For each of them, the purpose is far greater than the individual. The recovering addict can look forward to a day absent of chaos, desperation, deceit, indifference, and selfishness.

Coaching

Coaching affects and impacts the athletes' life in myriad ways. Young athletes tend to view their coaches as the face of the game. The coach knows more, teaches them more, simplifies the game and most importantly makes the experience enjoyable. Most coaches, especially if they have played, have hundreds of stories for every scenario. However, more than anything else, coaches hang their hat on teaching the fundamentals of the game. We cannot tell you how many times we've heard a coach say, "If you are fundamentally sound, you can play anywhere, with anybody."

In recovery, most addicts depend heavily on sponsors, their recovery "coach". Unlike sport coaches, a pre-requisite for a sponsor is that they are recovering as well. More and more coaches in sports have not played the game at the highest level, professionally. Herein lies an important distinction, the information, guidance,

perspective and experience that the sponsor has is invaluable to the process of recovery for an addict. The sponsor has also succumbed to behavior that is destructive and debilitating in its nature. The intrinsic value of one addict helping another cannot be minimized. The sponsors' recovery to some degree also depends on how willing he is to share his experience, strength, and hope. In recovery terms, he has to "give it away to keep it". John Lucas, the #1 draft pick in the NBA in 1976 has made a very successful career as an NBA coach and a life coach to athletes. John has a much publicized NBA career that was marked by addiction. We believe John's success in coaching and helping athletes in large part is because of his recovery.

Learning from Failure

Learning from failure is an ideal opportunity process. The late charismatic college coach, Al McGuire¹, believed that his best opportunity to teach players was immediately after a loss, a low point. It was during that moment he felt he had each individual player's uninterrupted attention.

It is very difficult to teach any individual that has found some measure of success. The adage "if it ain't broke, don't fix it" comes to mind. High achievers become profoundly open for suggestions, guidance and outside influence during moments of failure. Talented athletes seem to be the biggest culprits. Success and achievement have come easy, which makes it very difficult for them to understand why others cannot do what they have done or can do. It has been said that superstars make the worst coaches in sports. There are very few exceptions, but Larry Bird comes to mind as one of those.

¹ Lloyd Walton played for Coach Al McGuire and Marquette University from 1974-1976.

Larry was a very successful basketball player with multiple MVP awards and NBA championships. Larry was also successful as the Head Coach of the Indiana Pacers. He did not win a championship as the Pacers Coach but they were always in contention.

The failure parallel can also be seen in the world of recovery. Addiction is said to be possible only when the addict hits rock bottom. Again, most individuals become receptive to new ideas, ways, suggestions, and guidance only at their worst point. The degradation, hopelessness, loneliness, and lack of self-worth has prepared and provoked millions to seek and obtain a life of recovery one day at a time. By the same token, many addicts never see the light at the end of the tunnel and take the chance of someone else's ideas, ways, suggestions, and guidance.

Recommendations

Alcoholism and Addictions professionals who seek to utilize sports interventions when working with African American males can work to intentionally incorporate the practices mentioned earlier when planning, implementing, and evaluating programs. Treatment and athletics principles can be adapted to meet the needs of both the intervention and the population served. This can include the development of interventions for youth that address such issues as trauma; anger and aggression; relapse prevention; or social isolation with social and emotional learning; coping skills; and discipline. Also, research with youth who abuse substances and concerning social and emotional goals and understanding within sports needs to be expanded. This can lead toward the development of best practices for treatment programs and coaches and athletic teams concerning social and emotional learning and character development.

Team sports offer youth an opportunity to socialize with peers while engaging in an activity that may very well offer a sense of physical and emotional relief without feeling invasive.

In closing, these are two very distinct groups share a similar pathway to success. There are enormous benefits to the individual and the group as a whole when these fundamentals characteristics are present and used in a prudent manner. Programs that consider utilizing aspects of sports can utilize these principles to work young people, particularly African American males. Whether through utilizing examples and exercises utilizing sports, creating opportunities for aspects of athletics within the treatment milieu, or simply utilizing stories of current and former athletes who were able to recover and leave sober lives, the opportunities to encourage young people to lead whole lives can be endless utilizing sports.

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