

*Athleticism, Anorexia and Addiction:
Endurance for Recovery in Eating Disorder Awareness Month*

By Capt. Ryan Althaus MDiv, MBC

It's a common nightmare, and one you may experience this evening upon perusing the pages of this magazine and plot out your 2023 training and racing schedule...

You're in a race or being chased — swimming from a big fish, fleeing from a big bear or sprinting towards a big finish. You know how to run, remember what it feels like to run, and sure as hell want to run, swim, jump or leap... but you're not getting anywhere. Your legs are too heavy, your arms won't pull you through the water and your bike tires are glued to the asphalt. You're sinking in quicksand or getting pulled away from dry land — and the harder you try, the more fearful and frustrated you become as you feebly fight for a far off finish or flee from the ferocious feline gaining on you from behind. But then, just when your about to give up or get eaten, something magical happens. You wake up.

I remember waking up from that nightmare one morning not so long ago; however, it was not the obnoxiously familiar buzz of my clock that called me to consciousness, it was the warning alarm of the ekg machine I was attached to, alerting the nursing staff that my heart-rate had, once again, dropped to a dangerous level. I squirmed my way free from the sterilized sheets and set my feet on the cold tile floor, but something was very wrong — true, I'd awoken from my slumber, but not the nightmare! I stood up, but my atrophied legs struggled to support the weight of my body and my feet felt as though they were still sinking in quicksand. I knew how to run, I remembered what it felt like to be fast, and, lord knows, I wanted to flee from the ICU room I had opened my eyes to; however, my body was weak and wired to machines and IV's. I was stuck in a very bad, but very real, *disordered* dream.

Question: How does one go from elite athlete to *emaciated anorexic*?

Answer: By allowing their addiction to steal what was once a source of enjoyment and their lack of self-care and acceptance to impact their endurance.

Rewind:

My eating disorder and exercise addiction are nothing new — I'd lived with them for decades despite a stint as a professional marathoner, an elite Ironman Triathlete and an endurance athletic coach. True, I was skinny, but I managed to stay strong. I was driven, albeit secretly *disordered*. I was fast, but, undeniably, underfed. And, for as successful athletic career as I'd had, I was slowly slipping. Ever since winning my first race as a high school freshman, I had lived life in pursuit of a faster mile split, a steeper mountain and a victorious finish; however, little did I realize that all these ego-driven endorphin fixes were only feeding *Ed* (*the personification of my Eating Disorder, not an abbreviation for Erectile Dysfunction, as it is commonly mistaken*) And, as I began to fall short of my self-imposed list of evolving goals, *Ed* eventually convinced me to stop feeding myself.

In response, I ended up retiring from the endurance athletic world back in 2015, after heat exhaustion left me crawling (instead of my trademark cartwheel) across the finish-line of the Louisville Ironman with a broken heart, bruised ego and beaten body. In all honesty, I had been on a downward spiral for years, following a severe hamstring tear in the 13th mile of the Boston Marathon, but my addiction to training and exercise kept me from recovery. Thus, what was far from a career ending event led to a series of overuse injuries and my depressive decline. Had I rested and nourished my body I would have been back on the trails within a few months; but, unfortunately, rest and nourishment have never been my forte, and the guilt-rooted anxiety that came with stillness caused me seek *creative* ways to burn off calories that I had already cut from my diet upon being sidelined. Needless to say, it doesn't take a nutritional degree or coaching credential to recognize that forgoing fuel while upping one's energy expenditure is an unbalanced equation; however, *Ed* has a convincing way of overriding common sense.

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Exercise, or athletically-induced anorexia is incredibly common in the endurance sports community and its roots go much deeper than one's reflection in a mirror or the numbers on a scale. For athletes, it is anorexia is both a behavioral and substance addiction (and a deadly one at that) tied to our pursuit of an ever-illusory *runner's high* and the drug we know as dopamine. If you are reading this magazine, you know the feeling well, and whether you get your fix in the water, on the trail, atop a mountain, or soaring thru the sky — the endorphin-added euphoria is universal. However, as we hike, run, and climb our way through National Eating Disorder awareness month this February, I encourage all of us to pause and reflect on why it is we do what we do.

I am happy to say that I managed to crawl my way out of the ICU and free myself from the quicksand, but not without a few rounds of residential care that required more emotional endurance than any ironman I'd ever competed in. That said, I am far from in the clear because, unlike a drug or alcohol addiction, someone struggling with an eating or exercise disorder must face their drug of choice multiple times every day. In other words, you can't go cold turkey on food or movement... and we wouldn't want to because, when balanced, they each provide us a source of pleasure. However, in order to compete at our full potential and fully enjoy our athletic pursuits, it is essential to remember what got us into our sport in the first place.

In the exercise addiction recovery community we often talk about the difference between mindful and mindless movement. That term, *recovery*, carries two distinct connotations: there is recovery from a hard workout, injury, or race and recovery from a *disorder* or addiction — and both require intention, self-awareness and self-acceptance (things that so many of us struggle with.) As I alluded earlier, I lived most my life striving to prove myself via finishing times, adventurous social media pics, strava stats, et cetera... However, *proving myself* often entailed punishing myself — and at the end of the day, the only one that actually cared was me. When I had a bad race or workout I'd restrict my calories and train harder the next day instead of resting and refueling my body, and when I'd wake up injured, I'd load up on IBProphin instead of listen to my body's cries that it was overworked. Thus, anxiety and a lack of self-acceptance slowly transformed my training into what we call '*mindless movement*,' and, as a result, once pleasurable athletic pursuits became forms of self-punishment.

I remember the first supervised *workout* that I was allowed to partake in during residential treatment — it was a 'mindful movement' class that could best be described as yoga on tranquilizers.

"What do you feel?" the instructor asked while we gently lifted our arms above our heads into mountain pose and then bent forward to touch out toes.

Though I originally mocked her referring to our activity as *exercise*, her question called me to re-connect with my body and re-evaluate my personal state of fitness (or lack thereof.) My stiff hamstrings shouted at me as they struggled with the simple movement and my head spun as the blood rushed out of it upon straitening (a condition known as orthostasis.) This was the first time in a long time that I had focused on what I was actively *feeling*, instead of using activity as a means of fleeing from my feelings, and despite the ease of the *workout*, my body was telling me that it was sore and strained. I'd spent over a decade working out 4-8 hours a day — whether in a prescribed brick workout during triathlon season or anxiety-induced aerobic session — all in an attempt to mute the messages of my body; however, what this adventure in recovery has taught me is that exercise isn't supposed to break us down or mask our feelings, but build us up and make us feel better. Just the same, a race isn't about our finishing time so much the opportunity it provides to connect with like-minded friends. *Mindful movement* is thus an adventure of the body, mind, and spirit that allows us connect with our true self and community, not to escape ourselves.

So, as you peruse the many races, training ideas and activities filling this issue, take time to meditate on the magic of your chosen source of sport and ways of which you can

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nurture your mind, body and spirit through mindful movement instead of numb your emotions, aches, and pains by mindlessly forcing it. Furthermore, know that many of us struggle to find balance when it comes to nutrition and exercise (whether we over or under indulge), so, if are in need of some support, don't hesitate to seek it! Eating disorders are the most deadly of any mental illness. They are not you, rather sicknesses to be treated, not ashamed of. I was lucky to wake up from my nightmare and there are plenty of resources out there readily available to make sure you can awaken from your's too!