

ATHLETICISM, ANOREXIA AND ADDICTION

Endurance for recovery as we prepare for Eating Disorders Awareness Week

Ryan Althaus

I was having a recurring nightmare. Each time, it was the same but also different in some ways. There I was, in a race or being chased. I was swimming from a big fish, fleeing from a big bear, or sprinting towards a big finish. I knew how to run, remember what it felt like to run, and sure as hell wanted to run, swim, jump or leap ... but I just wasn't getting anywhere. My legs were too heavy, my arms wouldn't pull me through the water and my bike tires were glued to the asphalt — and the harder I tried, the more fearful and frustrated I became as I feebly fought for a far off finish or ran from the ferocious animal gaining on me from behind. But then, just when I was about to give up or get eaten, I would wake up.

I remember waking up from that nightmare one morning not so long ago. 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 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. I'd awoken from my slumber, but not the nightmare.

My atrophied legs struggled to support the weight of my body when I tried to stand up, and my feet felt as though they were still sinking in quicksand. I knew how to run, and Lord knows I wanted to flee from the ICU room. However, my body was weak and wired to machines and IVs. I was stuck in a very bad, very real, disordered dream.

FROM ELITE ATHLETE TO EMACIATED ANOREXIC

My eating disorder and exercise addiction were nothing new — I'd lived with them for decades despite stints as a professional marathoner, an elite Ironman Triathlete and an endurance coach. True, I was skinny, but I managed to stay strong. I was driven, albeit secretly disordered. I was fast, but, undeniably, underfed. And, in terms of my successful athletic career, that was slowly slipping away.

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 leading me to a bad place. As I began to fall short of my self-imposed list of evolving goals, my mind started convincing me to stop feeding myself as a form of punishment for falling short.

As a result, I ended up retiring from the endurance athletic world early. Heat exhaustion and fatigue left me crawling (instead of my trademark cartwheeling) across the Louisville Ironman finish. It was 2015, and I was left with a broken heart, bruised ego and beaten body.

In all honesty, I had been on a downward spiral for years. A severe hamstring tear in the 13th mile of the Boston Marathon shone a light on my addiction. Rather than resting and nourishing my body, I continued to train. What was far from a career ending event, led to a series of overuse injuries and a depressing decline. Had I rested and nourished my body I would have been back on the trails within a few months. Rest and nourishment have never been my forte, and the guilt-rooted anxiety that came with stillness caused me to seek creative ways to burn off calories that I had already cut from my diet. 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 the definition of an eating disorder.

ANOREXIA ATHLETICA

Athletically induced anorexia is common in the endurance sports community. In fact, athletes are more likely to suffer from eating disorders than people outside of competitive activities. The roots of the disease go much deeper than one's reflection in a mirror or the numbers on a scale. For athletes, anorexia is 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 through the sky — the endorphins-added euphoria is universal. However, as we hike, run, and climb our way through National Eating Disorders Awareness Week starting at the end of February (Feb 27 - March 5), I encourage all of us to pause and reflect on why it is we do what we do.

With the support of my community, 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 healthy because, unlike a drug or alcohol addiction, someone struggling with an eating or exercise disorder must face their drug of choice many 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

This page, top to bottom: Enjoying a soak after a tenish mile hike into Willet Hot Springs (Steve Adrian); A rainbow over Sespe Wilderness (Leonie Sherman). **Opposite page, top to bottom:** xxxxx Sespe Hot Springs (Leonie Sherman).

fully enjoy our athletic pursuits, it is essential to remember what got us into our sport in the first place.

MINDFUL VS. MINDLESS MOVEMENT

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 many of us struggle with.



As I alluded to earlier, I lived most of my life striving to prove myself via finishing times, adventurous social media pics, and Strava stats. 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 woke up injured, I'd load up on ibuprofen 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 our 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. 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 per day – whether in a prescribed brick workout during triathlon season or anxiety-induced aerobic session – all in an attempt to mute the messages of

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my body; however, what this adventure in recovery has taught me is that exercise isn't supposed to 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 as 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 to 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 in which you can nurture your mind, body and spirit through mindful movement instead of numb your emotions, aches, and pains by forcing it. Furthermore, know that many of us struggle to find balance when it comes to nutrition and exercise, so if you are in need of some support, don't hesitate to seek it! Eating disorders are a deadly form of mental illness. They are not you, rather sicknesses to be treated, not ashamed of. I was lucky to wake up from my nightmare and get on the path to healing. **asj**

You can share in Ryan's journey with athletics and support Eating Disorder awareness by grabbing his latest book, 'Emaciated to Emancipated: The Story of a Skinny Mango,' and be sure to visit his website at thesurfingmango.com

