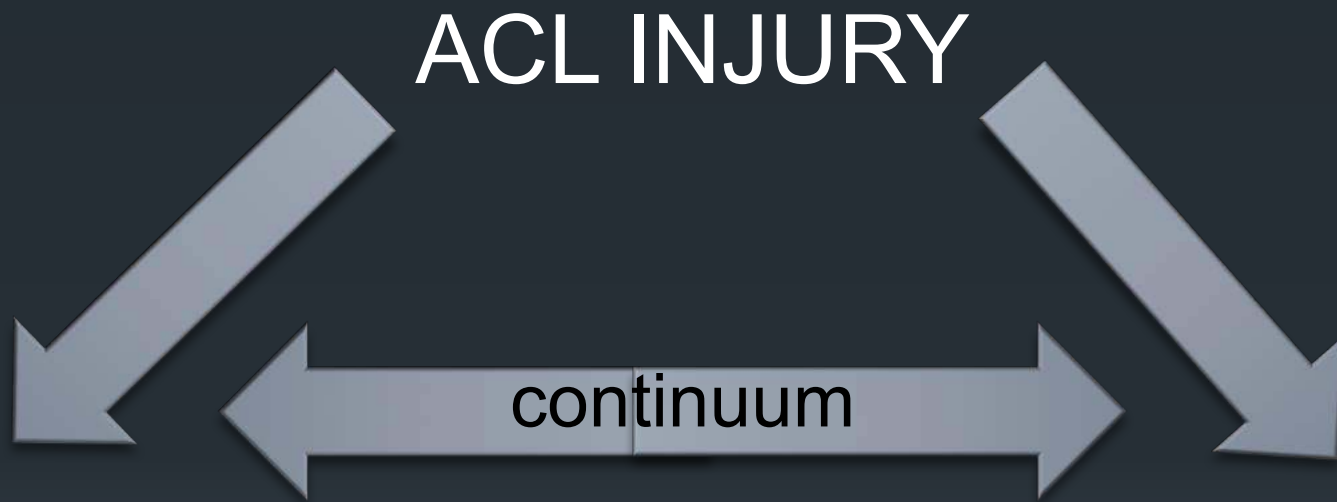




# Psychological Factors and Issues in Return to Play After ACL Reconstruction

JAKI HITZELBERGER, LMHC, MGCP

# Athlete's Perception




“This is the worst thing that could ever happen to me”

“Okay, what do I need to do to get back?”



# Risk Factors

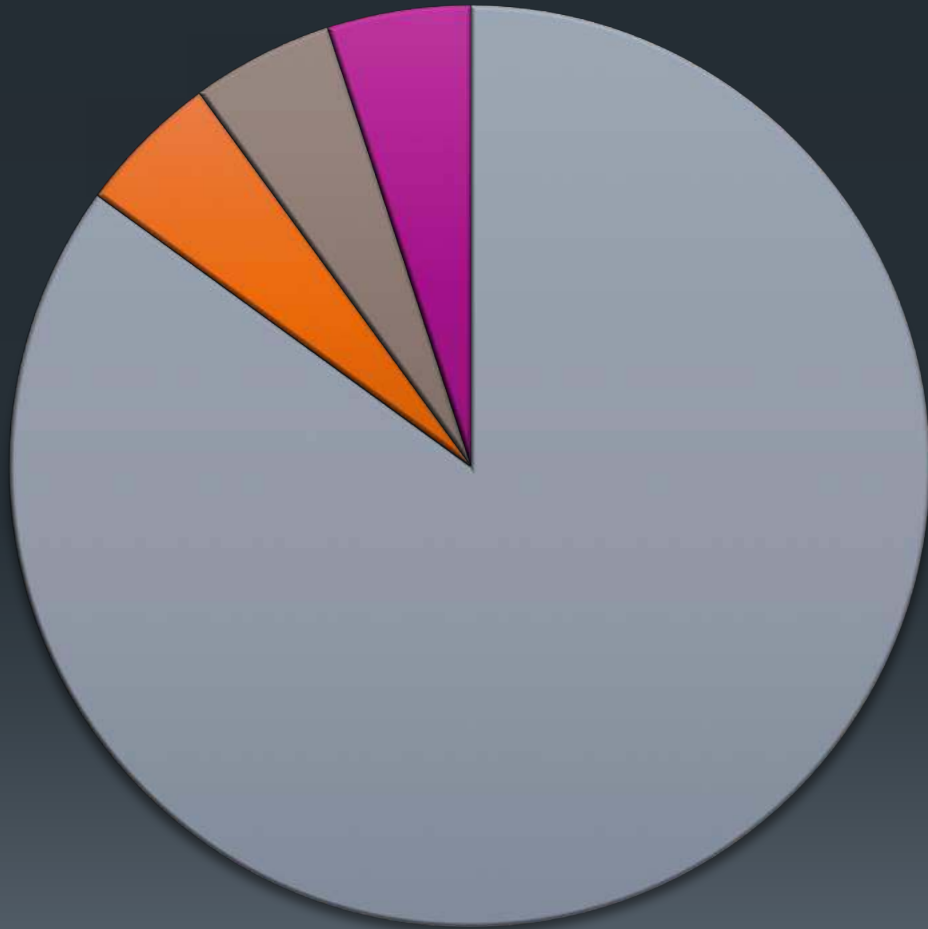
- Mental health issues prior to injury
- Family/community pressure
- Scholarship or professional contract
- Time invested in their sport
- How the injury happened
- How much their self worth depends on their identity as an athlete



# Mental Challenge #1

*Loss of Identity and  
Self Worth*

# Self-Worth




■ Sport

■ Friends

■ Family

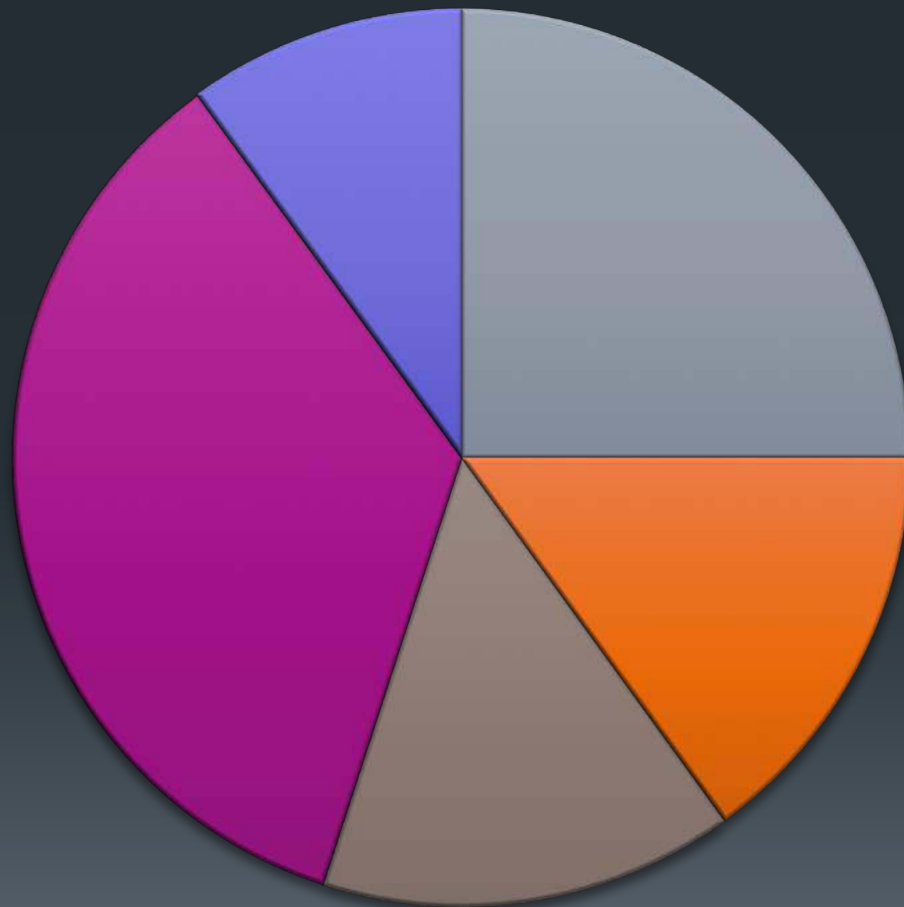
■ Inner Qualities



“Soccer is a huge part of my identity and having this injury made me really question myself. I felt like a piece of me was no longer there. I felt like I couldn’t be myself anymore because soccer wasn’t in my life constantly.”

“I didn’t know how to describe myself. I wasn’t the soccer player anymore. I felt like I had nothing else that described me and showed who I was.”

# Balanced Self-Worth




■ Sport

■ Family

■ Friends

■ Internal Qualities

■ Hobbies



“I eventually realized that I’m not just a soccer player. There is more to me than just a soccer player. I can love the game of soccer, but it doesn’t define me. My injury made me realize there are other things just as important as soccer in my life. “





# Mental Challenge #2

*Loss of Main Coping  
Mechanism*




## Some Athletes Use Their Sport to Cope With:

- Family stress / dysfunction
- Past trauma
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Body Image / eating disorders



## How Does Sport Help an Athlete Cope?

- Exercise – endorphins relieve stress / reduce depression and anxiety
- The amount of time – distraction
- Social support – connection and importance
- Achievement – gives them self worth



“Basketball was my drug of choice. If I didn’t play basketball, I would have done something else to the extreme. My family life was very dysfunctional and basketball served as a positive distraction. I felt seen and loved by my teammates. When I hurt my knee, I felt invisible.”



# Mental Challenge #3

*Loss of Social*

*Connection and Support*



## How Injury Affects Social Connections

- No longer involved as much with the team
- Used to feeling valued and important by coaches
- May not travel with the team during injury

“My coach never really spoke to me while I was hurt which made me feel so worthless. I wanted my coach to check up on me and ask me how I was doing. I felt like she didn’t care if I even got better.”

“Some of my teammates did check on me a lot right after surgery but as you get into month three or four everyone has moved on. That’s when it got the darkest for me. That’s when I needed support the most but unfortunately it wasn’t there.”



# Mental Challenge #4


*Not Being Able to  
be Active*





## Having to be Stagnant When Athletes Are Used to:

- Training every day
- Being physically challenged
- Constantly trying improve
- Competing
- Feeling a sense of achievement almost every day



“The most challenging part of my injury was feeling like I couldn’t do anything. You go from practicing, working out, and playing games every week to nothing. You can barely move or do anything. I felt like I was being lazy or unproductive. Physical therapy didn’t match the level of intensity I was used to”




# Mental Challenge #5

## *Fear of Re-injury*




## Fear of Re-injury

- ACL PTSD
- Fear of having to quit their sport due to multiple injuries
- Fear of doing surgery and rehab again
- Fear of doing what caused the injury (ex: slide tackle)



“When I returned to competition I was constantly thinking about the tackle that caused my injury. I was so scared that it could happen again and was replaying it in my head over and over. What helped me play with confidence was thinking about all the countless hours of work I had put in at rehab and believing that I was ready.”




Most Injured Athletes  
Who are Struggling  
Mentally Suffer  
in Silence



## Why Injured Athletes Don't Ask for Mental Support

- Stigma with mental illness
- Already physically injured
- Taught to push through without complaining
- Don't show weakness
- Expected to be mentally strong



“I didn’t think I could have a mental illness because I was an athlete so I battled depression for half a year. I tried to put on a face and fake it, but after a while I couldn’t fake it.

“The culture of athletics preaches the “best don’t rest”, “where there’s a will there’s a way” and “unless you puke, faint, or die... keep going.” To appear weak is the last thing an athlete wants.”





What advice would you  
give other athletes who  
have just torn their  
ACL?

# #1 Set Small Goals



“Try not think in weeks and months. Instead, set little goals like “I’m going have 90-degree range of motion in the first two weeks.” Small goals will keep you motivated and determined.”

“Celebrate the little wins. It will help you experience the satisfaction of competing and accomplishing something”



## #2 Focus On What You Can Control

“You don’t have to stop improving just because you’re injured. I couldn’t run or compete but there was a lot I could do to continue to improve as an athlete. I learned how to meditate and visualize, which are both techniques I still use now that I’m competing again”

# #3 You Will Come Back Stronger MENTALLY

“This injury showed me just how much I can overcome. From not being able to even lift my leg on my own to walking with crutches, to losing the brace, to running again. It was a long process that showed me the drive and persistence I have, which has transferred to my game and my mentality.”



## #4 You Will Come Back Stronger PHYSICALLY

“I am a smarter athlete and know so much more about my body and how to prevent any further injuries. I feel stronger, more mobile, and I can tell my balance is better than ever. Don't think, “I used to be able to do this and now I can't” rather think, “I am going to do this better than before.”



## #5 Get Support

“This injury has many ups and downs and if you don’t talk about it and get the support you need, it will just hurt you. I saw a Sports Psychologist and it helped me so much. You are able to work through your feelings and frustrations. It helped me keep my eye on prize of getting healthy again.”



## Conclusion

- It can be very mentally challenging for an athlete to tear their ACL
- They lose a lot more than just their sport
- PT's, coaches, and teammates play an important role in supporting the athlete
- Like most adversity, it's a chance for the athlete to learn important life lessons and become stronger.



“Every set back is a  
set up for an  
even greater  
**COMEBACK**”