

More to athletes than meets the eye

BY JAMES SULLIVAN

On a Friday morning a couple of weeks ago, a surgeon put me asleep and cut open my knee to take a peek inside. This is called orthoscopic surgery and it was my third operation in three years.

Some may say "what a pathetic loser," but others who have endured the agony of knee injuries understand the situation. Prevention is obligatory and dealing with the consequences can be painful, physically and mentally.

I've come to grips with the end of an athletic career, though I empathize with Al Bundy's reminiscences of the good old glory days.

At age five, I began to kick a soft plastic ball around the living room, and by grade three, I was playing organized indoor soccer after school with the sixth graders. Being too short to play basketball or volleyball (and I couldn't skate), I soon made the choice to play soccer.

Like any athlete, I was passionate about the game; I mean, I was obsessed. In grade nine, my club team went to Nationals in Calgary, Alberta. It was there where I really learned about the

game because we got absolutely trampled. I told myself I would never allow myself to be humiliated like that again, so I trained ten times harder.

But it was in high school where I noticed a different treatment or rather a different attitude towards athletes and athletics in general. Most of it was negative, being that we were just "dumb jocks." We weren't seen as people with families or lives of our own with unique personalities. We were the people representing the school, who were either winning or not winning. Nobody ever took notice that we love what we do and that it's a part of who we are.

Student athletes are tired all of the time and sometimes have financial stress. They are constantly reminded about "priority #1, to win," even though many coaches today don't necessarily say it in that manner. On top of that, they have mountains of schoolwork to take care of.

People sometimes say most athletes 'have it made' or that 'they own the schools they go to and that's the only reason they play sports.' Tell that ignorant crap to the doctor who has to clean up the mess in my leg. Or

how about to the kids I would like to have in the future about why I might not be able to throw a frisbee with them.

"Well son, I can't play with you because I was trying to be the big man on campus, and I destroyed my leg in the process."

Making sacrifices for the team aren't always as important as you thought they were. There is a difference between playing hard and just being stupid and reckless. Recognizing this is key if you want to live a healthy life.

I'm not looking for sympathy and I don't expect many of you to understand, or even care for that matter. But there are hordes of men and women who are in the same predicament. It should be looked upon in the same regard as a musician who might develop severe arthritis. The knowledge, the will, and the memory of skill is still there, but the ability to perform the act it is a world away.

If this freak accident happens, be prepared to make drastic changes. It's the will you used for training in sport that will be used in your rehabilitation. Only then will you truly see how strong you really are.

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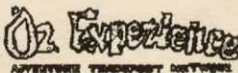
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