

BLOG #XX: How Overtraining Can Lead to Burnout and Lost Love for Your Sport

“Dr. Jud, I’m feeling so overwhelmed with everything right now. I don’t have the energy to do anything anymore, and I’m in serious risk of failing my classes.”

Those were the first words out of Jackson’s mouth when he walked into my office eight months ago. A 19-year-old Division I track athlete at a local state college, Jackson had always been the epitome of discipline and drive. He followed every regimen his coach set, kept a clean diet, trained year-round, and rarely skipped a training session. Now, though, he was anxious, depressed, exhausted, and increasingly detached from his sport, something he used to love with all his heart.

As a pediatrician who works closely with youth, high school and some collegiate athletes (many young adults keep going to their pediatrician through college), I’ve seen this more times than I can count. Overtraining syndrome (OTS) doesn’t just break the body—it breaks the mind. It comes in three stages, and Jackson was exhibiting the symptoms of being in Stage 3.

Stage 1 of OTS has symptoms including muscle pain and stiffness, anxiety, poor sleep, and unexpected weight gain or weight loss. Stage 2 has symptoms including insomnia, mood swings, high blood pressure, and tachycardia (an unusually fast heartbeat). In Stage 3 of OTS, Jackson was extremely tired all the time, unable to complete his work or get excited for practice anymore, and his resting heartbeat was less than 60 beats per minute. This was alarming, and I knew that Jackson needed help.

The Culture of Constant Output

High school and college sports today are more competitive than ever. Jeez, even local youth leagues—with parents applying ample pressure from the sidelines—can feel nearly as competitive. Kids are expected to juggle intense training routines, with both normal practices and weight training or other forms of cross training, as well as jam-packed academic schedules, social obligations, activities, and sometimes even part-time jobs. The pressure to perform among youth athletes is relentless. For many like Jackson, rest is equated with weakness, and pushing through pain is seen as a badge of honor.

But the human body—particularly the young, developing body—can only take so much.

Overtraining occurs when an athlete trains beyond the body's ability to recover. Physically, it leads to fatigue, poor performance, injury, and sleep disturbances. But the more insidious impact lies in the mental and emotional consequences. The relationship between overtraining and mental health is strong—and often overlooked.

Mental Health Deterioration in Overtrained Athletes

When Jackson came in, he described an overwhelming sense of dread every time he stepped onto the track. Beyond the symptoms mentioned earlier, he was losing interest in school and social life, and experiencing frequent mood swings. After a full workup to rule out medical causes, it became clear: Jackson was mentally burned out. His brain was responding to prolonged stress with classic signs of depression and anxiety.

Studies confirm this isn't rare. One widely-cited study published in Sports Health found that athletes suffering from overtraining syndrome often present with symptoms that mimic clinical depression, including apathy, irritability, lack of motivation, and difficulty concentrating. In fact, for parents/spouses/friends (and even pediatricians), it can be difficult to distinguish between OTS and depression because of the significant overlap.

Another research article from the British Journal of Sports Medicine notes that the psychological responses to overtraining often include emotional instability, increased anxiety, and a higher risk of substance abuse. These symptoms don't just go away with a day off. They require real intervention and recovery, sometimes both psychological and physical. They require a support system, including a crew who can support the athlete in their healing, something that I've written about a few times now.

Burnout and Identity Crisis in Youth Athletes

What makes overtraining particularly dangerous for college athletes is the erosion of identity. Many of these young men and women have spent their entire lives tied to their sport. When they begin to underperform or mentally detach from it, they often experience a crisis of self. Jackson told me he felt “useless” when he wasn't training or competing. He couldn't recognize himself outside of track. And I could relate to this, reflecting on periods when I've been in a state of overtraining. I myself remember those endless nights of not being able to sleep well, obsessing over my next run or bike ride. It felt like I couldn't fully recognize my true self outside of those workouts. But as an adult, you can contextualize these emotions better than when you're young.

This is more than just a motivational slump. A 2020 paper in *Frontiers in Psychology* examined burnout in student-athletes and found a direct link between overtraining, emotional exhaustion, and what they called “depersonalization”—a feeling of

disconnection from one's sport, teammates, and even one's own self. (Isoard-Gauthier et al., 2020). For Jackson, this came out in the form of intense guilt during rest days, self-loathing after poor practices, and a growing fear that he was disappointing everyone around him—his coaches, his teammates, and even his parents.

The Need for a Paradigm Shift

What many schools and athletic departments fail to understand is that mental fatigue and burnout don't appear the same in every athlete. For one student, it may look like missed classes. For another, it may appear through poor performance in practices or competition. Another athlete may withdraw from the hobbies they enjoy, or stop spending as much time with friends.

Most of the time, from my perspective, an overtrained athlete is one who can appear to be fully intact physically, but is struggling mentally or emotionally. And unfortunately, it often goes unnoticed by others until the athlete has a panic attack, a breakdown, or some other crisis. And that is usually where I'm asked to get involved as a pediatrician.

Part of the responsibility lies with the coaching staff. Training cycles must be built with mental rest in mind, not just physical recovery. There needs to be an open dialogue between athletes, trainers, and medical staff about how athletes on the team are feeling, both mentally and emotionally. The commonly used phrases like "toughen up" or "push through it" are not only irresponsible, but can be dangerous in some situations. Coaches have a hard job of trying to distinguish when it's appropriate to set high expectations and when it's too much.

Jackson's Road to Recovery

For Jackson, the road back involved more than just cutting down on training. We worked together with a sports psychologist over the span of four months, created a flexible routine that included rest days, and perhaps most importantly, helped him rediscover who he was outside of track. He learned to identify what values he cared about most and how to run toward those values rather than outcomes. It was not a quick fix, but eventually, the spark returned. He smiled more. He slept better. He could talk about his goals again without that distant look in his eyes.

And no, he didn't quit. In fact, he just ran his personal best this past season. But now, he listens to his body. He knows that pushing himself too far doesn't make him stronger—it just makes him sick. It made me think of my own journey with mental health and endurance training and how I had to rediscover that balance between exercise and my daily life, both for my family and for myself.

The Journey to a Life of Balance and Healthy Training

For physicians, coaches, parents, and educators, we must remember that these athletes are people first. Pushing the body to its limit is part of sport, yes, but it shouldn't come at the cost of someone's mental health. Overtraining isn't just about sore muscles or slow times—it's about silent suffering. And if we don't change the culture, we risk losing far more than championships.

Here at *The Balanced Athlete*, we work to change that culture and overcome that silent suffering, and to help athletes of all ages have a place to share their stories. Overtraining, in a way, can be a physical manifestation of mental health struggles, something I can personally attest to, which is why we work hard to help our community understand the importance of rest.

The last thing any athlete needs, especially youth athletes, is to get hurt or be burnt out to the point of withdrawing from daily life completely. Join me in the journey towards a life of healthy living, and a proper balance between sport and life. And please, if you feel comfortable, share your stories of being overtrained and how you made it through.

Amidst imbalance, let's strive for balance, together.

Jud

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Notes:

- let's highlight a future blog about differentiating OTS vs Depression
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