

An insight into the struggles of motherhood as a Female Athlete

Reported by Sports Journalist Malaya Rodezno

In the past decade, there has been a considerable increase in female athletes wanting to settle down and have a family. However, many must retire before choosing to talk about starting a family. Pregnancy is known as “the end” for many female athletes as the health risks associated with pregnancy and return to sport overshadow.

According to the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 45% of women want children in their lifetime. Due to maternal instinct, it's expected that women will have some sort of distinctive desire to have children.

There are many challenges faced by female athletes daily. Funding, pay, gender stereotypes, discrimination and sexism are some that generally come to mind. However, the idea of motherhood for a female athlete is a topic that sparks controversy. “Why don't female athletes have surrogate mothers instead of getting pregnant while they are in their athletic prime” is a question that appears subsequently. Not only do women face challenges for themselves but they also deal with the backlash from outsiders who question their motives to have a family. When tennis player Serena Williams took time off to have her daughter, she was criticised by the outside world. Many questioned why she would take time off when she was in the ‘prime’ of her career.

Candice Parker, WNBA Player, Matilda's midfielder Katrina Gorry and AFLW legend Daisy Pearce are notable female professional athletes who had children and returned to sport in less than a year. Parker returned 52 days after she gave birth to her daughter to compete for a WNBA Championship title. AFLW player Pearce welcomed twins Sylvie and Roy one year after returning to the league to win the flag. Paula Radcliffe returned to running just 12 days after giving birth to her daughter Isla in 2007, then went on to win the New York Marathon later that year.

Having a family has always been on the bucket list for Elizabeth Moore. Moore who is now a mother of two reflected on her journey and experience of returning to sport, firstly after having her son who is now 6 years old and her daughter 3 years old. Representing the Australian Defence Force for touch rugby and the Yarraville Seddon Eagles for Australian Rules Footy, Moore has struggled with her return to sport. “In some ways very frustrating and nerve-wracking, your body doesn't quite do what you think it should” she said. Moore said she always stayed fit during her pregnancies but with no lack of knowledge about what you can and can't do during pregnancy, she wishes she was provided more. “You just don't know, what you didn't know until you did” she said. Dealing with the consequences is how many women deal with the lack of research and knowledge surrounding pregnancy for athletes returning to sport.

Many barriers and enablers are influencing female athletes who choose to return to sport post-partum. Claire Rollison, a female football player who plays for the Yarraville Seddon Eagles expressed the challenges she faced during and post pregnancy when she returned to sport a year after her children were born. “My main challenge was the sensitivity I had around my body”, she said. Rollison now a teacher said she still reflects on a time where not much information about returning to sport post pregnancy. Being one of the older women on her current team she said, “I have pretty much been the minority” of those experiencing pregnancy at a football club, where it is new. At times Rollison said “I thought I was letting my team down” when she faced the challenge of having to miss trainings and be late to games based on her having to look after her children as a parent.

Pregnant and post-partum athletes face additional challenges due to uncertainties regarding the normal changes of the body and maintaining a proper healthy lifestyle. Specialists and doctors suggest not to increase the intensity of your sporting program while you are pregnant. Women should always work at less than 75 per cent of their maximum heart rate according to The Department of Health and Sports Medicine Australia. (*Health, 2017*) Women can stay active right up to the birth as long as they feel well and comfortable. Obstetrician from Northwest Private Hospital in Queensland, Dr Jamie Friebe said he “recommended women can return to graded exercise 6 weeks after giving birth.” Dr. Friebe said “There are no limitations with women returning to sports gradually, but it would depend on their previous level of fitness.” The effectiveness of exercising and whether they will manage to return to their previous performance and competition level post-partum. More female than male athletes decide to retire from their sporting career when they become parents, contributing to gender inequality in sports.

Netball, despite being considered a “women’s sport” had previously failed to support pregnant players or those wishing to return to play as mothers. Many players had to deal with the consequences of starting a family and were left with no contract but instead stripped and replaced. Many professional netballers suffered until a landmark deal was announced. In 2016, when the Super Netball competition began, a parental care policy was put in place that included, travel arrangements for both infant and support persons. Players were also entitled to private health contributions of \$1500 as well as ‘100% income protection on all earnings for up to two years in the event of an injury or pregnancy’ according to the Queen Victoria Women’s Centre.

In the AFLW, players who elect to continue playing during their pregnancy are expected to maintain appropriate levels of fitness and performance. Pregnant AFLW players are given the choice to opt out, if not cleared fit or decide not to play do receive full payment from their club during the term of their contract. Players who are breastfeeding will also be allowed to travel to interstate matches with their baby/partner/support person, with the clubs to pay for extra flights and accommodation.

According to the International Federation of Association Football (FIFA), women are entitled to a minimum of 14 weeks of parental leave, with at least eight weeks after the player gives birth. Leave must be paid at a minimum of two-thirds of the player’s salary

unless more beneficial conditions apply under national law or a collective bargaining agreement. When players return to work, clubs must provide adequate medical and physical support including opportunities for breastfeeding or pumping. Clubs must not discriminate against players for becoming pregnant or giving birth.

However, not all sporting leagues value pregnancy for female athletes. Track and field female athletes don't have contracts like team-associated sports. Their income comes almost exclusively from sponsorship deals inked with companies like Nike and Asics. They rarely offer enough time off to accommodate a child based on a basis of salary and time to take off without pay.

The Olympics Association have yet to comment on whether female athletes can participate while pregnant.

The Australian Institute of Sport has launched a study into pregnancy among elite female athletes. The study which is called The Mum-Alete Project, helps attract and retain women in the high-performance system. Backed by several researchers, lead researcher Dr Victoria Forsdick, the study will seek to improve policies and guidelines for female athletes post and pre pregnancy in Australia.

Looking forward the fight for maternity rights in women's sports is still a matter of conversation for the future.

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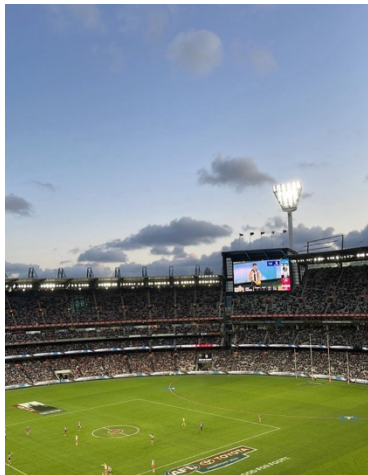
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Images:



Caption: When will the Olympics comment or set guidelines for pregnant female athletes?

Source: Malaya Rodezno



Caption: Will other sports follow with the guidelines of leagues like the AFL?

Source: Malaya Rodezno



Caption: Young soon to be mother thinks about what is to come.

Source: Malaya Rodezno

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