

FLAGSTAFF— Athletes live and breathe for the sport they play no matter the cost, even injuries. This is no different for Heather Gneiting and Justin Gaethje.

Heather Gneiting



Gneiting comes from a family of athletes. Her dad played professional basketball in Spain and her sisters played volleyball in college. She followed that path as she committed to play volleyball for BYU in 2018.

“I was super into volleyball and I would get recruited when I was playing club. I knew I wanted to stay. I’m from Utah so I wanted to stay in Utah. I always wanted to go to BYU and so they offered me and decided to go there,” Gneiting said.

Gneiting took an 18 month break in February 2020 as she decided to serve a mission for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. She would later rejoin BYU in the 2021 season.

For Gneiting, her biggest enemy playing volleyball was not a player or a team.

It was concussions.

“When I first got to BYU, I got a concussion right away so I wasn’t able to play that much. Concussions are hard so you don’t really know when you’re going to get better. It’s kinda like a day-to-day basis and it’s definitely very trialing,” Gneiting said.

Through it, she was performing well with the team and even reached the final four her freshman year.

However, Gneiting would continue to get more concussions later in her career.

After graduating, she got invited to play for the USA volleyball team but that would quickly end as she got a concussion.

“The summer I was invited to play with USA volleyball, I got a concussion the first week. I ended up going home and it was super disappointing because I didn't get to go play,” Gneiting said.

Gneiting also agreed to play in Turkey after graduating but encountered another concussion which marked a final chapter in her playing career.

“I got another concussion and I knew I can't really do much more. My injuries are getting to me, Gneiting said.”

“I'm never going to play the same and like it's kind of an identity crisis. I like volleyball and everything about who I am, but my injuries are not allowing me to play anymore.”

For the game she grew up in, now suddenly came to an end. Gneiting had all the support from family, coaches and teammates but says that people need to care for an athlete's mental health.

“I think they should offer a therapist or someone in the department that works with athletes that are injured. Not only regaining your strength but your mental side too,” Gneiting said.

Gneiting currently resides in California with her husband and they have one child.

Justin Gaethje



Justin Gaethje mural in Safford, AZ. Courtesy of Eastern Arizona Courier

Gaethje has a similar path to Gneiting when it comes to identity.

Gaethje grew up in a small town in Arizona called Safford. His passion: wrestling.

After wrestling in college at Northern Colorado University, Gaethje trained to become a UFC fighter in which he accomplished.

With constant punches to the head and even knockouts, Gaethje expressed that he needs all the help to mentally prepare him for his next fight.

“My coaches for my team are with my parents. How I compete, how I view the mentality of competing and overcoming. Obstacles and losses I can't really rely on somebody that doesn't know me,” Gaethje said.

UFC is a type of Mixed Martial Arts that is a demanding sport physically and mentally. It takes a lot from these athletes to compete fight after fight.

“MMA and sport psychology is an evolving literature. To date, researchers addressed historic and often studied sport psychology themes. In addition, given the violent nature of MMA, researchers examine aggression and fear,” **researchers** from National Library of Medicine said.

Gaethje still fights in the UFC today and expressed that his story is not finished as he continues his career.

“I can't write my story if I know if I just did not go away. I started this journey and I've committed to finishing writing the story,” Gaethje said.

What can we learn from this?

Both Gneiting and Gaethje endured many concussions throughout their career. Because of that, it has become who they are today.

Athletes need to have their voices heard.

Families, friends, coaches and all those close to the athlete need to be there for them. Athletes' health and safety needs to come first.

Sources

- Heather Gneiting, @heathersaydam on Instagram
- Justin Gaethje, gaethje@gmail.com
- <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8870784/#sec5-ejihpe-12-00007>