

Severe football injuries and media attention: You will always walk alone

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Aim of paper and research questions

In this paper we seek to estimate the media attention received by top football players suffering a severe injury. This was done by calculating the number of daily news appearances of injured players in the group 600 players of the 32 teams in season 2008/09 UEFA Champions League, in all major football and press markets (more than 70 countries).

Injury is one of the most feared foes of professional footballers. The forced interruption of training and playing games due to the consequences of an injury may have a very negative impact on the professional career of a football player. This is especially the case when the injury is severe, leads to surgery and to several months of recovery before playing football again. Some sportsmen never reach their previous level of sport performance after such an incident. This perspective, plus the physical suffering linked to the recovery exercises makes the recovery period a hard time for a footballer. This difficult period may be even harder for top football stars, used to be at the centre of supporter and media attention. After the typical massive news impact in the aftermath of the injury, media coverage vanishes rapidly as the absence from the pitch takes longer. This unforeseeable, quick and radical change of role for top football stars may have a severe psychological impact. This paper provides an empirical analysis of the dynamics of the media impact of severe injuries on top football stars, using the ESI-rg media value methodology.

Literature review

There is an extensive literature about severe injuries in football, mainly focusing on physical and medical causes and consequences of injury. Hawkins et al. (2001) report on this in a massive epidemiologic study on football injuries and Chomiak et al. (2000) have studied the influencing factors. Waldén et al. (1985) examine the risks of new severe injuries and Engström et al. (2006) analyse to which extent such injuries lead to the end of a career in elite football. Concerning rehabilitation, many studies focus the analysis on physical recovery (Tucker, 2000). Only few studies relate to the psychological influence of injuries, like Junge et al. (2005) and, more specifically Sanderson (2008). Our analysis provides useful empirical data in line with this strain of the literature.

Research design and data analysis

Using the ESI-rg media value methodology we counted the media exposure of seven injured elite football players after suffering a major injury at the beginning of the season 2008/09 (van Nistelrooy, Fabregas, de la Red, Essien, Gatusso, Réveillère and Govou). This allowed us to generate a common profile of media attention throughout the injury period by aggregating the evolution of media impact for all seven players.

Results

Our data indicates that during the first month after the injury, the level of media exposure received by every player almost doubled in comparison with their pre-injury media value levels. Nevertheless, after the first month, the level of press notoriety started to erode sharply, coming back to levels similar to before the injury after some 40 days. Two months after the injury, the level of media value is cut by half in comparison with pre injury status.

In order to expand the span of our time analysis, we reduced our sample to the four players for which we had a longer post injury time-window. Our results indicate that the drop of media value does not stabilize after the second month, and continues its decreasing path during the third month of absence in the football matches. Media attention for those players almost completely ceased. The level of media attention at the end of the period reached 16% of the player's media value before the injury. We can conclude that media abandon football stars, even if they are top ranked players if they enter into a long period of football inactivity. This loss of media value is a continuous and progressive process, after an initial spike in the coverage after reporting the injury.

Discussion and conclusion

Our results clearly confirm the initial comments: a top football star faces a severe and abrupt change of role in terms of notoriety. This phenomenon can influence the recovery process. We hypothesize that this effect is non reversible, as media is not interested in sustaining media presence of an inactive player for such a long period of time.

Knowing and understanding how media attention can influence the wellbeing of injured football stars may become very precious information for the players themselves and for team managers as well. Players may be more prepared in assuming the a period of lower media value profile. Team managers can be more conscious of the responsibility of offering more personal and psychological support, through the coach, team mates and professionals.

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