

# BURNOUT: THE INVISIBLE

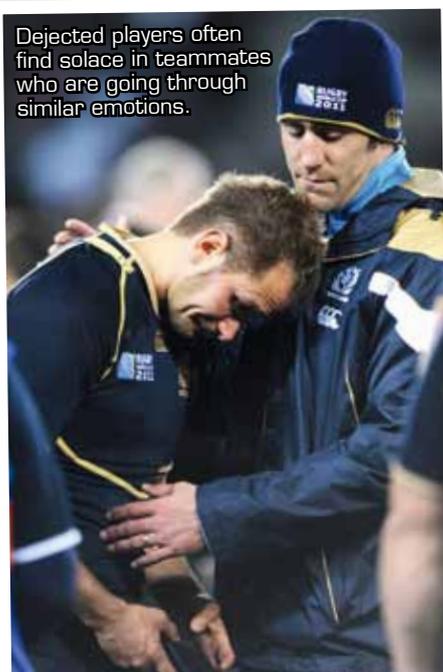
Burnout is not just about a professional rugby player feeling fatigued after 35 games in a season. It also affects the mental side of players and is no straightforward condition.

**BY DR NICOLA DAVIES**

“Sort of desolate, decayed, the smell of – I don’t want to dramatise it – but death, you know. That is what it feels like, no-man’s-land, and it is not a nice place to be.”

These are the words of New Zealand’s Anton Oliver when talking about the mood in the changing room after the All Blacks’ Rugby World Cup 2007 quarter-final defeat to France. This description may seem dramatised to people unfamiliar with the sport, but to professional and amateur players alike, these words will strike a chord. The mindset of the rugby player is one of a driving ambition to perform well and win, as well as the desire to achieve team and individual excellence. While these traits are to be admired, they can pose risks to the mental wellbeing of players. In particular, this inflexible mindset can lead to burnout.

Burnout is a term used within occupational psychology to describe a condition that gradually develops due to prolonged or long-term stress.



Dejected players often find solace in teammates who are going through similar emotions.

With a mindset focused on complete excellence and success, with no room for loss or failure, rugby players are in a continual state of stress. This stress might not even be obvious to them, but it is lurking underneath their dedication to the game. Eventually, it leaves the person feeling overwhelmed and unable to meet their own and others demands and expectations. Professional rugby players are particularly prone to this condition, although it can afflict amateurs too.

Long-term emotional, mental and physical exhaustion; lack of enthusiasm and motivation; excessive worrying about injury and failure; feeling drained and frustrated; suffering chronic headaches, colds, or insomnia; social withdrawal; cynicism and negative emotions; considering quitting the game. These are not among the characteristics usually expected in rugby players, but they are the characteristics to be found in a rugby player suffering from burnout. This is why it is essential for players to develop a mental toughness that enables them to withstand the mindset that it is an important driving force behind their success.

A further risk factor for player burnout is that teams and players are signed up for competitions that involve games on a weekly or more frequent basis, spread over many months. Players need to maintain peak physical fitness to avoid physical injury or exhaustion. At an international level, players are required to travel and to be away from home and family for long periods of time. The pressures are many, and inevitably stress on the individual is the by-product. When the level of stress rises and is not managed well, burnout is inevitable, which has adverse effects on performance. Lack of fulfilment of the perfectionism, goals and expectations that initially brought the player to the game can be the catalyst for losing the ability to achieve rugby-related aspirations.

What can players and coaches do to avoid the crippling effects of burnout that are a huge risk factor within this game? Experts believe that prevention is better than a cure. They believe that the primary way to prevent the adverse effects of stress is to identify the likely stressors and to remove them or, if they cannot be removed, to formulate plans for managing them. While a rugby player cannot change his role or

career direction, nor can he change the pressures generated from the public and the media, he can develop his mental muscles and train himself to deal with his own potential stressors.

There have been many studies carried out around the world relating to burnout and the identification of strategies to avoid, control and treat its effects. Assessment of physical factors and making appropriate changes in routine can lead to reductions in the rate of physical exhaustion. Better time management, more relaxation and an increase in personal time spent away from the game can also ameliorate physical and mental exhaustion.

In addition, research suggests that psychological processes, such as self-efficacy (i.e. self-confidence) and learning to be resourceful and self-reliant may insulate individuals from experiencing burnout. In an article published in *The Sport Psychologist* in 2006, researchers said, “We suggest that practitioners teach athletes three or four effective coping strategies that include at least one problem-focused, emotion-focused and avoidance strategy.”

They clarify that “this way, when faced with controllable or uncontrollable stressors, athletes always have a relatively effective coping strategy to deploy.”

\*A problem-focused strategy might be changing your relationship with the source of the stress. Speaking to the *New Zealand Herald* in 2000, following the suicide of former Waikato and Taranaki player Ryan Wheeler, Koula Tukino said his attitude now was that rugby was not everything, and that “there are a lot more things in life – there is life after rugby”.

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Without wishing to sound flippant, that may be part of the reason Tukino did not turn up for the bus before a Counties game against Auckland in 2001.

Rugby had ceased to become important.

\*An emotion-focused strategy might be talking to other players, friends, or family about the stress. However, this can be a source of stress in itself, with sports psychologist David Hadfield pointing out that, "some players might find it difficult to speak out because there is still a 'macho, manly' image connected with the sport".

His views were reflected in those of Gilbert Enoka, a sports psychologist attached to the All Blacks and Crusaders squad, who said, "pressures on

professional rugby players are immense," as the sport is "in the nervous system of the nation".

\*Finally, an avoidance strategy might be walking away from situations that are stressful, such as walking away from a defeat as opposed to watching the other team celebrate.

Former All Blacks star John Kirwan, now coach of the Blues, has said the key for players who are struggling is to talk to someone. Furthermore, Hadfield, who is attached to the Hurricanes team, has said that players could run into problems if they base their self-esteem entirely on the sport. The bottom line is that the admirable dedication and work ethic of rugby players does not have to be at the cost of health. The rugby player mindset can prevail without harming the wellbeing of the player. For the public and media, it is important to remember that, according to Hadfield, "These players are not just rugby machines, they're human beings and they have the

same fears and worries and concerns as anybody else... you must have a balance."

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Santiago Fernandez's disappointment and sadness after the Pumas' 2011 Rugby World Cup exit is clear.