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UNSCREWED? A PLAYER'S PERSPECTIVE ON RETURN TO FOOTBALL FOLLOWING SERIOUS INJURY

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Gary Barclay and Laura Munro

PREFACE

Ten years after an on-field act of violence led to a near fatal injury and associated post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), I (first author) am finally ready to return to a game that I love, football. The physical injury suffered was a fractured second cervical vertebrae. Recovery initially required 12 weeks wearing a halo brace and vest. The psychological recovery from this injury, however, has taken much longer. This article explores insights into the eventual return to playing football. This article may be useful for psychologists, mental skills trainers, and others involved in working with injured athletes to help them appreciate the potential psychological impact of injury and challenges faced in return to play at any level. What follows are my last memories of the game of football preceding my injury.

Saturday 18 May 2013: Local football field

I wake up on the ground ... I'm lying flat on my back. I feel tingling in my arms and legs ... I know instantly that this is a sign of spinal damage. I tell the people around me, "Don't move me!" I try to lift my head but I can't even do that. ... I'm screwed...! I'm lying here thinking about a life of paralysis. I'll never be able to go for walks or bike rides with my family. My kids are going to miss out on me. I'm going to miss out on them. Images of my family riding their bikes next to our local stream come to mind, but where am I? I'm really scared ... I can't take this anymore, I just want to sleep. (Barclay & Middlemas, 2016, p. 25)

Wednesday 16 August 2023

The Women's Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) World Cup is currently taking place in New Zealand and Australia. The hype of the world cup, in conjunction with watching people around me enjoying playing football, have made me think seriously about playing again. These factors, as well as the continual 'pull' of playing with friends (Barclay, 2023), have made me prepare for a return to the 'beautiful game.'

The transtheoretical model of behavioural change identifies a variety of stages ranging from pre-contemplation (not considering change), contemplation (considering change), through to preparation, action, and maintenance of long-term behaviour change (Pennington, 2021; Prochaska et al., 1992). In anticipation of a potential return to football (entering the preparation stage) and knowing that I need to reduce my risk of injury due to my age and previous injuries, I consult the Accident Compensation Corporation (ACC) website for resources on preventing injury in football. I look for the FIFA 11 warm up routine which is an evidence-based, football-specific warm up designed to help reduce injury risk (Bizzini & Dvorak, 2015).

With only two games left in the season I am thinking that I might be able to attend the last couple of practices for a 'kick around' with old friends. I arrive at the local football ground unannounced expecting to join in on practice with the over-35 and over-45 teams. Unfortunately, they have cancelled the session. Disappointment sets in that no one came to play! I come home to the usual family mid-week routine and any disappointment dissipates quickly as I merge back into family life.

Friday 18 August 2023

At the Edgar Centre, a local indoor sporting complex, I watch our students teach sports-related skills to children from a local primary school. That is when I realise I know one of the teachers through playing football together during high school and at my local club. We begin talking and our conversation quickly turns to football. I joke with him about my disappointment at not being able to attend Wednesday night practice. He gives me the name and number of the over-45 team manager which is a step closer to making re-engagement happen. At this stage, the intent is to have a practice with the team. But interestingly, there is also a slight hope that I might be able to play a game. I tell myself that hope is ridiculous with just two games left in the season, to quell potential disappointment.

I am ambivalent about contacting the team manager so close to the end of the season. Such a sense of ambivalence is considered normal for those in the contemplation stage of behaviour change (Pennington, 2021; Prochaska et al., 1992). However, despite my reservations I go ahead and text him. He almost immediately calls me back saying that they are short of players tomorrow and asks if I would like to play! My self-talk in this moment is: "Holy shit, it's happening!"

I quickly ask my wife if she needs me for anything tomorrow afternoon when the game is scheduled. She looks at me with a mixture of a smile and hesitancy and says that we have no other plans then. Great! I have my wife's support. Cautiously I reply, "Yes, I can play." My heart is pounding, and I can feel the excitement coursing through my body. The adrenaline is flowing, and I am full of energy! I warn the manager I will not be 'football fit' but he assures me that my fitness should be okay: "It's over 45s so there is a wide variation in fitness. You will be fine!" We end the call with, "See you tomorrow."

I was not realistically expecting to play at all this season. But it is happening, and so quickly! There is no backing away now. I will stay true to my word regardless of how I am feeling about the speed of this transition back to play. I have always been a 'team man.' This sense of commitment and motivation to the team fits with the relatedness component of self-determination theory which suggests that behaviour can be motivated by our need for autonomy, to feel competent, and to feel connected to those around us (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2020).

I reassure my concerned family that I should be safe during play. Later in the day my wife expresses her excitement for me to be playing again. Her attitude this time contrasts with my last attempted return in 2021, when she was not in support of me playing again (Barclay, 2023).

I am questioning my football ability having not been to a practice this season. I reflect on what training I have done including running and resistance training in addition to kicking the football around with my son, which means I should be capable regarding general fitness and skills. But playing a game of football which requires a wide range of fitness capabilities will be more challenging (Milanović et al., 2019).

My son and I have our usual Friday afternoon kick around at the local football ground but the feeling and purpose of it is different this time. This is not just preparation for my son's game tomorrow. This is for me, too! We return home and I start to get my gear ready for the next day. I am playing football, I remind myself. Wow!

Making connections again to the transtheoretical model (Pennington, 2021; Prochaska et al., 1992), I have now moved from preparatory actions like getting injury prevention information from ACC on Wednesday, contacting

the team on Friday, and seeking my wife's approval (possibly in the wrong order), to suddenly starting the action stage on Saturday. I wasn't expecting this to happen so quickly, if at all, this season.

I realise that I need to calm down amid this excitement, or I might burn valuable energy before the game. I start using the following phrase to help reduce my activation level: "slow down to calm down." This simple phrase and associated actions of slowing down my movements while breathing more slowly and deeply has helped me experience a sense of calmness in the past. The use of breath control is widely regarded as an effective strategy for reducing activation levels (Jerath et al., 2015). I begin to clean my boots. I remind myself why I am doing this: "Because I am playing football tomorrow!"

Knowing our game is a 'home game' is helping me feel more relaxed about playing as most things, including the field and surroundings, will be familiar. Previous performance accomplishments in this environment are helping me feel confident in my ability to perform (Ashford et al., 2010; Bandura, 1986).

Interestingly, and not surprisingly, I also experience fleeting thoughts about my injury in 2013. The thoughts include how much damage was done to my physical and mental health as a result of the injury and the challenges faced during my treatment and recovery. I open my wardrobe and have a vivid and physical memory of wearing my halo brace and vest. The sensation returns of how restricted my movements were at the time. I can feel the tightness of the titanium pins that are screwed into my head. I feel the comb running through my hair as my wife attempts to comb through the dry powder she uses to clean my hair, which I am unable to wash in the shower. The memories are fleeting and not very distressing but serve as a reminder of what we went through. I calm myself somewhat by remembering that I will handle the way I participate in this game more carefully than I did in 2013.

The main strategy that I will use to keep me safe is managing my distance from others where possible and sticking to the over-45 grade where the game is slower and less intense than other grades. When I last considered re-engagement in football in 2021, I thought I needed to tell people to "be gentle with me," and to wear a coloured bib or neck collar to help keep me safe. This time, I am not having such thoughts. I know that I can walk away from any form of confrontation and that I can leave the game or substitute myself off if I do not feel safe. I take comfort from the fact that I have a sense of autonomy over how I play and feel competent in my ability to follow through on this. Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2020) suggests that autonomy and competence are two important aspects of motivation. I feel like I am returning to football on my terms.

On occasion, I experience waves of emotion. I am on the verge of crying about playing tomorrow. Playing football again is an enormous step for me in terms of my overall healing from what happened to me 10 years ago. I know that if I let myself focus too much on the significance of what I am about to do, I could easily cry. Is this relief that I am finally going to be able to play after 10 years? Is this anxiety about the possibility of getting injured? Am I just excited at the prospect of playing again with old friends?

Saturday 19 August 2023

Game day! I wake at 4.45am and struggle to get back to sleep. Between then and the alarm going off at 6.20am, I spend most of my time thinking about football. I just cannot 'switch off.' I decide to use mental imagery of me performing various football skills successfully to help build my confidence for the game (Levy et al., 2011).

I am feeling excited and positive about my game this afternoon, but I continue to have fleeting memories of life following my neck injury. I remember being in the ambulance; wearing the halo, and not being able to wash properly. Again, I comfort myself with thoughts about how I will involve myself in the game. I also seek comforting hugs from my wife. She acknowledges that this is an important step for me, and we continue to remain positive.

After lunch I purposely do things slowly. "Slow down to calm down" is the phrase that I continue to use and it seems to be working well. I am feeling relatively calm and relaxed about playing my first game of football in ten years.

Before the game

Half an hour until kick-off! I walk over to meet the team at the clubrooms and introduce myself to those people I do not know. It feels good catching up with old friends. Several of my teammates are surprised to see me, but very welcoming and appreciative of me being there to help, given several of the regular players are unavailable due to injury.

In the changing rooms, I quietly get changed and remind myself to "slow down to calm down." I have written "slow" on a piece of tape that I have around one of my fingers as a reminder to consistently use this statement. Self-talk is an effective psychological skills training method for improving psychological performance in sports (Hatzigeorgiadis et al., 2011) and appeared to work well for me in this situation. We leave the changing rooms to do some warming up. I try to remember as much of the FIFA 11 warm up programme as I can.

During the game

Before the game starts, our captain tells my teammates to pass me the ball during the game because he thinks that I am a good player. At the time, I found this both embarrassing and unrealistic given the fact that I had not played in 10 years. Perhaps he was just trying to help build my confidence through verbal persuasion, a useful strategy for developing self-efficacy: a situation specific form of self-confidence (Weinberg & Gould, 2024).

I play on the left wing which I feel comfortable with as it gives me plenty of space thereby limiting the chances of unexpected collisions. Midfield positions can involve more body contact and tackling. I look over and appreciate my wife, daughter, and son watching me. This support from family is hugely important in my return to play.

The game is played in friendly spirits. There is a lot of banter between both groups of teammates and between teams. It seems like a primary motive for everyone involved is having fun with each other, which is consistent with systematic reviews looking at the motivations of mature sports participants (Stenner et al., 2020).

In the first half of the game, I have two minor collisions. Both leave me on the ground. The first does not result in any injury but the other involves a knock to my right ankle which gives me a fright. Thankfully, neither of these minor collisions cause any negative psychological response.

At half time, one of the spectators approaches me to say it is great to see me out there playing again. He was there in 2013 when my neck injury happened. He tells me he still remembers that day and how bad the incident was. I do not want to 'go there' during my comeback game so I swiftly change the topic.

After the game

After the game we stand around talking as a team while I finish my bottle of water and recovery drink because I know I need it. A couple of players from my team compliment me on my return to football and suggest that I had a good game.

Back in the changing rooms, the team captain asks if I am available next weekend. I say, "Yes, so long as I recover okay." The significance of what I have just achieved is yet to fully register.

Back at home, my wife gives me a big hug and says, "Well done, sweet!" A few times throughout the evening I think, "Holy shit, I did it!" After all this time and uncertainty, I did it! I feel proud of myself and relieved to have gotten back on the football field.

Sunday 20 August 2023

Having successfully got through my first game of football in 10 years, I am now confident in my ability to do the same in the last game of the season. Bandura (1986) and Ashford and colleagues (2010) identify that previous performance accomplishments are a powerful source of self-efficacy-enhancing information. Being able to successfully do something is likely to enhance belief in one's ability to complete that or similar tasks again in the future. Similarly, in alignment with self-determination theory, I am feeling competent in my ability to perform because I played successfully yesterday (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2020). I also feel a sense of relatedness with the group based on knowing so many people in the team and their positive feedback and friendliness towards me (Ryan & Deci, 2020). As with my 2021 football practice experiences, "I know that I am not out of place; I feel like I belong in that environment and can be successful" (Barclay, 2023, p. 34). I am hoping that I can play in the last game of the season next weekend.

Monday 21 August 2023

Back at work, I share with one of my close colleagues that I played football at the weekend for the first time in 10 years. She knows about my neck injury and is very congratulatory and excited for me. She mentions how much I was smiling at telling her my news. I am sitting at my desk feeling like I could cry. I think that this is occurring due to the release of my emotions and being able to share my progress with my colleague.

Wednesday 23 August 2023

I receive a text message from the football team manager asking if I am available for the game this coming Saturday. He says, "Hope body held up OK this week." I respond that I am "very keen so long as body is better by then!" I am excited about the prospect of playing again this weekend and being part of the team.

REFLECTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Decision making

After 10 years without playing football, I have found a way to 'close the loop' and become involved in the game again. To better understand how this happened, it is worth reflecting on some key aspects which may have helped in my progression from spectator to player.

The thoughts of "Could I get hurt?" and "What if I get hurt again?" are still there. However, the feelings associated with them seem more manageable and less anxiety-provoking than previously. The combination of staying away from conflict and as much contact as possible by playing in the wing position, and playing in the over-45 grade, is helping me to feel safer in the playing environment. I seem to be more at peace with the fact that the actions of one person which led to my injury were so rare and ridiculous that they are unlikely to happen again. It appears that I have found additional ways to manage my vulnerability to harm schema: my tendency towards over-protectiveness where I would respond to perceived dangers with heightened levels of anxiety despite minimal chance of harm (Barclay, 2023). This has allowed me to return to play.

As discussed above, self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2020) posits that motivated behaviour can be attributed to having a sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness regarding that behaviour. The attraction to playing football with teammates again is strong (relatedness), as is the belief in my ability to perform the physical skills required (competence). Additionally, there is now a strong sense of choice that I can make my return to play in a manageable way that is safe for me and under my conditions (autonomy). One of the most difficult aspects for me to deal with long term was the fact that my involvement in football felt like it had been taken away from me due to the assault and subsequent injury. I lost my sense of autonomy regarding my

involvement in football which was disappointing. Now, after all these years, it feels like I have found a way to take back my autonomy by playing a game I enjoy on my terms and with my safety in mind.

It would be remiss at this point to not mention another potential contributing factor to my long-awaited return to football in 2023. In 2022, I sought therapy for some mental health challenges that I was experiencing outside of football. Part of the treatment for this was taking part in eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing (EMDR), a therapeutic technique developed by Shapiro (2004) and found to be associated with positive outcomes for those with PTSD (De Jongh et al., 2019; Van der Kolk, 2015). Although the sessions with my therapist did not specifically target my neck injury experiences, it is possible that the success of the treatment in reducing my anxiety levels and sense of personal safety 'spilled over' into other life areas. I thereby inadvertently experienced broader benefits, including feeling more comfortable being on the football field again.

It has been fantastic being back in a team environment. Members of the team have been very supportive and encouraging, especially those who knew of my previous injury. Their praise during and after that first game back helped me feel a sense of competence and belonging to the group which further spurred my desire to remain with the team in the future. My experience has been a positive one, not just at a personal level but also within the playing environment. Throughout my first game, I saw people being respectful to referees, playing fairly, having a laugh and generally just having fun, all of which motivates me to want to play again.

A further benefit of these positive experiences may be continued healing from the PTSD I experienced because of the assault that led to my injuries. Research indicates that positive and supporting relationships can help prevent and heal PTSD (Van der Kolk, 2015). Therefore, the support that I have received from my most recent playing experience may flow on to further my recovery. Perhaps playing football again with old friends will help me re-establish important social connections. After my injury, I thought I was "screwed." Now, perhaps I can 'unscrew'!

Implications for practice

The current article provides implications for practitioners supporting individuals returning to play following a significant injury. Identifying strategies to develop a sense of safety within the player can enhance feelings of control. Having a plan to substitute the player off if they are feeling unsafe; allowing them to play in a position where contact is less likely; and discussing autonomy of pace and on field positioning during the game may be useful strategies.

In addition to enhancing the player's sense of safety, encouraging the involvement of wider support networks such as family, friends, team members, and management may be useful. As demonstrated throughout this article, the power of connection has been important firstly, in my feeling supported to return to play, and secondly, enhancing the enjoyment experienced while playing. The current article highlights that focusing on the enjoyment aspect of the activity, rather than the outcome, can benefit returning to play. Returning to play in a social grade where the objective is enjoyment could enhance connection with team members and reduce anxiety around performance.

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