



Off-court battle with binge eating: Coaches must be part of the solution not the problem.

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ABSTRACT

Food was the only way to silence my demons. I'd walk into the kitchen, grab a bag of crisps and a bowl of chocolate ice cream, then head to the couch and eat in front of the television" (Monica Seles, 1999). This paper reviews binge eating by examining Monica Seles's account of her off-court battle with this disorder. Implications and recommendations for coaches are discussed.

Key words: Binge eating, Eating disorder, Coach.

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INTRODUCTION

In Monica Seles' autobiography 'Getting a Grip' the tennis legend detailed an intimate account of her nine-year battle with binge eating. It was a condition that consumed her daily thoughts and caused her tremendous turmoil and trauma. As she articulates in an interview, "I always loved to eat but eventually eating overtook my life. I could control a tennis match. This I could not control at all" (McNeil, 1999, p. 9). What led Monica Seles from the lofty heights of World No. 1 to binge eating and how she regained health and happiness are covered in this paper. Further, the implications for coaches of this fascinating yet harrowing journey are explored. Before addressing these items, the definition of binge eating should be considered.

What is binge eating?

Binge eating is an eating disorder defined as the recurrent (at least two days per week) and persistent (at least over a six month period) overeating of large quantities of food (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 1994). The disorder is associated with a lack of control, emotional distress and persistent concerns about body shape or weight. Those who are binge eaters often suffer from multiple co-occurring problems including obesity and other medical issues, low self-esteem and poor athletic performance (Sundgot-Borgen & Torstveit, 2010; Wilson, Grilo & Vitousek, 2007). As such, binge eating is akin to a form of addiction with obsessive thoughts about food and a preoccupation and strong compulsion to eat followed by feelings of guilt and angry regret. Possible warning signs that may indicate binge eating are listed in Table 1.

Warning Signs That May Indicate Binge Eating

- A preoccupation with food, weight and kilojoules
- Eating alone and avoidance of eating in public
- Always going on a diet 'tomorrow'
- Dramatic weight gain over a relatively short period of time
- Mood swings
- Negative thoughts about oneself or guilt especially after over-eating

Table 1. Warning signs that may indicate binge eating (adapted from Garner & Rosen, 1991; Sherman & Thompson, 2001).

Prevalence of binge eating

The incidence of binge eating in sport is difficult to ascertain with limited research conducted amongst tennis players (Martin & Love, 2010). One of the reasons for the difficulty of getting statistics is the secretive nature of the binge eater. Overeating is often done in private, and indeed in secrecy, as individuals attempt to hide their eating habits from others (Sundgot-Borgen & Torstveit, 2010). Due to the lack of research evidence, it is reasonable to assume that Monica Seles is not an isolated case of binge eating among tennis players.

Causes of binge eating

The literature indicates that the causes of binge eating for athletes are many and varied. According to Sundgot-Borgen and Torstveit (2010), elite athletes often feel pressured to achieve the 'ideal' physical body and improve performance. These authors contend that many elite athletes feel that their weight, shape and size are constantly evaluated by coaches. Indeed, some coaches may directly contribute to an athlete's disordered eating by applying pressure and/or telling an athlete

to lose weight believing this will enhance an athlete's performance. Further, it is thought that significant life stressors, for example death of a family member or serious illness, can often act as triggers to binge eating (Sundgot- Borgen & Torstveit, 2010).

What insight does Seles provide as to the cause of her binge eating?

According to Seles she 'plunged into a fog of darkness and depression' following the now infamous and horrific stabbing incident when playing a match in Hamburg against Magdalena Maleeva on 30 April 1993. When leading 6-4, 4-3 and while she was towelling off during a changeover she was assaulted by a man who plunged a nine-inch serrated boning knife into her left shoulder. While the physical scars took several months to heal, Seles' 'darkness' grew with concerns about her father's diagnosis with cancer and her own self-doubts as to whether she was able to, or wanted to, return to tennis. Further adding to her fragile mindset were concerns that her attacker, Gunter Parche, never spent a day in prison (only receiving a two-year suspended sentence for causing grievous bodily harm and subsequently undergoing psychiatric treatment). Her failed lawsuit against the German Tennis Federation for inadequate security was a costly and unfair outcome. Seles also alluded to the fact that she felt pressure from well-meaning coaches, trainers and nutritionists in her attempts to regain her 'world-best' status in the game. She turned to food as solace and comfort in exceptionally challenging times both on a professional and personal level.

Monica Seles's strategies to combat her binge eating

In her book Seles describes a number of strategies that she adopted to address her binge eating. These make for fascinating reading because she abandoned simply relying on others for solutions and turned her thoughts inward. 'I made a few big changes in (my) thinking which then affected some deep-seated behaviors... I stopped looking for answers on the outside and starting listening to the quiet voice inside of me. Suddenly I knew that the problem wasn't what I was eating. It was what was eating me' (Seles, 1999, p. 259).

Key strategies adopted by Seles in her successful recovery are listed in Table 2.

Replacing the words 'diet', 'allowed' and 'forbidden' with 'moderation'

No longer was Seles 'on a diet' where foods were classified as either 'allowed' or 'forbidden'. Instead she adopted a new lifestyle habit by eating a range of foods (including cake, cookies and pasta) in moderation, and taking time to savour each mouthful. As described by Seles, she refused to say she was on a diet, and learned to live 'in the liberating and calming grey area of moderation' (Seles, 1999, p. 260).

Key Strategies Adopted by Seles to Combat her Binge Eating

- Replaced the words 'diet', 'allowed' and 'forbidden' with 'moderation'
- Adopted the 'less is more' principle
- Adopted the '20-second rule'
- Accepted and empowered herself to make positive choices at meal times
- Integrated walking into daily routine
- Found new interests
- Gave herself permission to grieve her father's death
- Bought 'The Little Black Dress'
- Took control where it was possible to do so
- Referred to her food journal

Table 2. Key strategies adopted by Monica Seles to combat her binge eating.

Adopting the 'less is more' principle

Seles realised that there was truth to the 'less is more' principle in relation to food intake and exercise. Having always been one to believe she had to do more training and practice to achieve success in her tennis, Seles learned to let go of excessive or extreme behaviours. As she says, she learnt 'how to live (my) life more fully by choosing less' (Seles, 1999, p. 260).

Adopting the '20-second rule'

Seles realised that she used food to cope with her emotions so she adopted the '20-second rule'. Rather than turn to food for comfort when distressed about a problem, Seles would slowly count to 20 thereby giving her time to think about how best to tackle the problem. Most times she would find an answer before the count of 20.

Integrating walking into daily routine

Taking a daily 45-minute walk became a saviour to Seles. Walking was her time for reflection, rebuilding and exercise. As such, it was her therapy and 'time out' when faced with the temptation of food or feeling anxious about problems. Most significantly, walking gave Seles the opportunity to really get to know her true self that had been difficult to achieve when she had played on the circuit and had been required to travel extensively, attend media conferences, fulfil sponsor requirements, train, practise and compete. As explained by Seles, 'My walks helped me heal the rift between my mind and my body. These soothing walks did more to quiet the demons in my head than any of the punishing workouts I endured' (Seles, 1999, p. 261).

Accepting and empowering herself to make positive choices at meal times

Allowing time to really understand her true core, Seles realised that, whilst she had perfectionistic tendencies (e.g. setting extremely high standards with little tolerance for mistakes) she was also a person to love and respect. Meal time subsequently became a time to reinforce her positive image of herself as it

was a regular opportunity for her to make liberating decisions by choosing sound nourishment and balance (i.e. reasonable portions of food) over self-destruction (i.e. over-eating large volumes of food).

Finding new interests

Seles embarked on new activities including a parachute jump, wandering around Paris and organising the photographs her father had collected of her 20-year career into photo albums. In doing so, Seles found meaning, satisfaction and enjoyment in a range of new pursuits that filled her days (and alleviated the boredom she felt when away from the tennis circuit).

Giving herself permission to grieve for her father

There was no denying the devastating loss Seles felt when her father died. He had been her ‘rock’, inspiration, coach, mentor and friend before succumbing to cancer. Seles allocated time to grieve for her father and, in doing so, gained an acceptance that she would be able to cope on her own and she could live with the fact that she may never win another Grand Slam title. Seles realised it was possible to find new meaning in life without her adored father and tennis.

Buying ‘The Little Black Dress’

When visiting New York for treatment on a foot injury, Seles bought the black dress of her dreams. Although it was size four, and Seles was several sizes heavier at the time of purchase, the dress became an inspiration. As described by Seles, ‘that little black dress became a symbol of reclaiming the real me – my true core’ (Seles, 1999, p. 259).

Taking control where it was possible to do so

Seles adopted a new philosophy to control what she could and let go of those things that she could not control. While she could not control her father’s death or the stabbing incident in Hamburg for example, she realised that she could control the way she treated her body and herself. She would now do this with ‘kindness’ (versus criticism) and adopt nutritious eating habits as something she chose to do rather than being forced or told to do so. Eating sensibly was now a personal choice that she initiated and controlled.

Referring to her food journal

Seles kept a food journal in which she recorded her food intake, exercise regime, resolutions and other personal thoughts. She would read this journal when she needed additional inspiration or motivation claiming ‘I read some of my old journals and it helped me realise that I did not want to go back there’ (Wertheim, 1999, p. 98).

IMPLICATIONS FOR COACHES

What can coaches glean from Seles’s story of her battle with binge eating?

Recommendations for Coaches
-Become educated about binge eating to increase awareness
-Emphasise proper nutrition and healthy eating and exercise to players (versus focusing on weight and appearance)
-Use role models with normal body weight
-Focus on and emphasise skill development instead of body weight as a means to achieve performance goals
-Be careful of choice of words (e.g. weight, diet)
-Avoid singling out players with regard to body weight or shape
-Eliminate individual and group weigh-ins
-Dispel the myth that ‘thinner is better’
-Be sensitive to a player’s feelings especially in relation to traumatic life-events and comments about their body
-Gain a fuller understanding of the relationship between weight and performance and be mindful that decreasing weight does not guarantee improved performance
-Lead by example by adhering to a balanced and nutritious eating program
-Take an individual approach to determine optimal training and competition program for each player
-Discuss with the player if binge eating is noticed or suspected – this approach needs to be done early, directly and confidentially especially with respect to other players. Gain consent from player for referral to specialist (dietician/nutritionist, psychologist)
-Be a positive team member (including parents, psychologist, trainer, nutritionist) to support a player who has a binge eating disorder
-Consider possible postponement to coaching a player if severe health risks are evident

Table 3. Recommendations for coaches in relation to minimising the risks for eating disorders (adapted from Arthur-Cameselle & Battzell, 2011; Gamer & Rosen, 1991; Sherman & Thompson, 2001; Sundgot-Borgen & Korstveit, 2010).



Prevention of binge eating

- Awareness of binge eating stems from an understanding of the disorder. Coaches may need to become better educated about the causes and manifestations. Such information, together with resources about balanced and optimal nutrition, is available from many National Coaching associations and/or the International Tennis Federation website;

<http://www.itftennis.com/scienceandmedicine/health/eating-disorders.asp>.

- Given that the pressure to be thin is a critical risk factor for binge eating (Sundgot-Borgen & Torstveit, 2010), coaches should avoid applying pressure telling a player to lose weight. One of the best ways to de-emphasise weight is to avoid comments about weight but rather focus on performance enhancement via psychological, technical and physical skill development. Words are extremely powerful so coaches need to choose these wisely and prudently. Singling out players because of their body shape or weight should be avoided.

- It is important that a coach takes a 'holistic' approach in working with a player. Coaches should be mindful that a player's tennis can be greatly affected by life's issues and pressures. No two players are alike and, accordingly, care needs to be taken to understand the individual as a person and not just as a tennis player. This is best achieved if a coach can try to see things 'through the eyes' of the individual player. Comparisons with other players should be avoided and the interests of the individual player, and what is best for him/her, should be foremost at all times. Understanding, empathy and support are critical at times when a player suffers a severe disruption or loss in his/her everyday life.

- Coaches may wish to reflect on their own philosophy of coaching. Does he/she believe that weight loss or reduced body fat will enhance performance despite the fact that research in this area is equivocal (Sherman & Thompson, 2001)? Rather than advocating the fact that weight or body fat determines success, coaches can assure players that better nutrition, and subsequent better health, should improve performance. A player who is properly nourished and hydrated will likely outperform one who is not, as will a player who is not depressed and obsessed with eating, food and weight related issues. In this context coaches can emphasise skill development over body weight as a means of achieving playing success.

- Coaches can lead by example and embrace nutritious and balanced eating habits. Given coaches are often critical role models for players this can be most effective in reinforcing the importance of proper nutrition.

Detection of binge eating

- Coaches are in a prime position to monitor their players' behaviours and reactions (Sundgot-Borgen & Torstveit, 2010). Accordingly, coaches need to be on the alert for warning signs of binge eating including significant increases in a player's weight and dramatic changes in mood or emotion (refer to Table 1). These changes in combination may well be indicative of binge eating and coaches should consider arranging a private meeting with the player to discuss their concerns. It is important for coaches to be direct but supportive in discussing the nature of their concerns. It is also important to advise the player that discussions will remain confidential and referral to a specialist will only be done with that player's consent. To some extent the actions of coaches are limited if a player is in denial (of binge eating) or does not wish to consult a specialist (e.g. nutritionist/dietician, psychologist). In these circumstances a coach can continue to be supportive and vigilant until such time as the player is ready to seek professional help. In some instances players are fully capable of finding their own solutions to their binge eating. To this end coaches can adopt a facilitating, supportive and collaborative role, one which empowers a player to discover for him/herself the answers that lie within the individual (versus 'telling', 'instructing' and/or 'directing' the player to get help). It is however vital that players understand that help is available if required and pursuing help might be the single most important thing that can be done to achieve or preserve success (Garner & Rosen, 1991).

- If a player is under 18 years of age, and there is evidence that a player is experiencing symptoms of binge eating, then coaches should take their concerns to the player's parents. As noted above, coaches should inform parents that discussions are confidential and the player's well-being and health are their primary concern.

Management of binge eating

- Coaches can play a strong supportive role in a team that includes a trainer, nutritionist, parents and psychologist (Sherman & Thompson, 2001). To this end coaches can be good 'sounding boards' and listeners who show empathy, concern and understanding by not being critical of the player's eating

behaviour. Focusing on the future and what can be achieved with the player's tennis can be very inspirational for a player suffering from binge eating.

CONCLUSIONS

As exemplified in Seles's story, binge eating is far more profound and far-reaching than merely a choice to find comfort in difficult times. Binge eating is a totally dysfunctional, distracting and destructive disorder that almost destroyed Seles's happiness, health and tennis pursuits. Fortunately Seles drew inner strength and resolve to develop a new mindset and find answers to a condition that saw her weight balloon and her spirits plummet. In doing so, Seles fought back and rediscovered happiness and well-being.

Coaches will be aware that Seles's struggle with binge eating is unlikely to be an isolated case and other players may well be inflicted with, or at risk of developing, the disorder. It would be an ideal practice for coaches to know what to look for and how to approach and support a player who may have these difficulties.

Given pressure to lose weight and traumatic events are primary risk factors to the onset of binge eating, coaches need to know that they have a pivotal and positive role to play in its prevention, detection and management. Most significantly, coaches have a duty of care to minimise the risk of (unknowingly) contributing to a player's binge eating with inappropriate emphasis on weight, body shape and 'thinness'. It is imperative that coaches are part of the solution to binge eating and not the problem. A player's health, well-being, happiness and tennis achievements may well depend on it.

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