

Mental Illness

Published 18/04/16 by [Barb Augustin](#)

You have an athlete who loses their temper and swears at others in training – what do you do? The same athlete makes phone calls threatening physical violence to one of their fellow squad members – what do you do?

Would your answers change if you knew the athlete was mentally ill?

This is a predicament I was presented with earlier this year and I thought I'd share the experience.

Firstly I had to consider what my role is as a coach. As coaches we:

- have to respect the basic human rights of ALL athletes – the mentally ill athlete and also those threatened by him.
- must ensure the safety of our athletes.
- must accept final responsibility for the conduct of our athletes, while also encouraging their acceptance of responsibility for their own conduct.
- must recognise that ALL athletes (the mentally ill athlete and also those threatened by him) have a right to pursue their athletic potential.

The dilemma was how to keep this athlete in the sport and yet protect the other squad members?

If you know the athlete has a mental illness, there are a number of support organisations you can talk to or e-mail for advice. . If you only suspect the athlete has a mental illness, it is still worth getting in touch. The bodies to contact will naturally be different in England to the ones in Australia, where I live, but there is a definitive list of UK mental health support organisations listed [here](#).

In my case, the athlete in question has a diagnosis of bipolar disorder, with some added complications that haven't been divulged to me. For simplicity, I'll call him 'Fred' and the athlete he threatened 'Mary' (not their real names).

Based on my research, I developed the following plan:

- If Fred misbehaves in future he will be subject to the same disciplinary actions as any other athlete (and clearly and empathically explain that aggressive behaviour is not acceptable).
- Mary and other squad members have been informed that they are to contact the Police immediately if they are threatened by Fred.
- If I suspect Fred is having an 'episode' of mental illness, or is heading that way, I will tell him to see his Doctor. I may escalate this by calling his mother.
- I contacted the club president and a selected club member and told them what had happened and what I was doing about it. The selected club member is an older man that had strong connections with the athlete.
- I copied the research on bipolar disorder for the club's library.
- I explained the plan to Fred. In any future discussions I will ask him for suggestions.

The situation at the moment is that Fred has realised he behaved badly and wrote a letter of apology to the club (for the swearing and loss of temper). He said he would also write a letter to Mary, but has yet to do so. His attendance at training has been erratic, probably because he feels awkward and embarrassed and doesn't know how to face Mary.

There is absolutely no certainty that Fred won't repeat his behaviour, but I believe I have put in place appropriate steps to help him and protect others.

Other types of mental illness may require other management methods. I strongly suggest you seek advice regarding your particular situation.

I would like to see coach education include some basic training in this area. What are your thoughts on the subject? I look forward to hearing your opinions.

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