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Brainstorm: Of Princesses and Football Players

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Of Princesses and Football Players

By: John Medina | Posted: April 16, 2012



Sports-related head injuries are getting a lot of press these days. Learning from injuries sustained by prize fighters, hockey players, and American football players, researchers are beginning to understand there are severe consequences to sustained trauma on the mental life of professional athletes — even amateur, Saturday-afternoon athletes. Sports officials could do well to remember the cautionary tale I am about to relate here.

Our story did not occur in this century, nor did it occur in a sports venue. It involved the king and queen of Sweden more than 400 years ago. The queen wins my award as one of the top 10 worst mothers in the history of European aristocracy. But she may have something powerful to say to offensive linemen in our century.

Our award winning mom — this 17th century Queen of Sweden — gave birth to a child who would become, temporarily, Christina I. The good news is that she grew up to be a fairly competent monarch during her tenure. The bad news was that she grew up damaged, physically and mentally.

A lot of it had to do with her parents' behaviors, especially her mom.

Desperate to have a son, Christina's pregnant parents consulted soothsayers and wise women, who tacitly assured the queen she would give birth to a male heir. The baby was born covered in hair, crying with such a deep voice that at first they thought they had their little king. But, alas, Christina was a girl.

The father, undeterred, decided to raise her as a prince, and lavished such attention on Christina that the queen became jealous. And abusive. She began routinely dropping the infant on her head. "Accident-prone" was the excuse, but Christina also "routinely" ran into falling beams and heavy furniture in early childhood. These cumulative injuries resulted in one of Christina's shoulders being permanently higher than the other.

Parts of her brain were clearly spared debilitating head trauma. She grew up to speak six different languages, was trained to fight in battle like a prince, and

learned to navigate the complex intrigues typical of all European courts. But she was also narcissistic, injured, and confused — especially sexually. She donned male clothing, rarely combed her hair and had sexual liaisons with both men and women. Eventually, she converted to Catholicism, an illegal religion in Sweden, which forced her to abdicate her throne. She may have suffered from depression, something she has in common with many retired American football players. Christina traveled to Spain, and died in Rome, where she's currently buried.

Is there anything in this 17th century behavior relevant to our 21st century experience?

When I give lectures about brain development to audiences composed of anxious parents-to-be, one issue that routinely comes up is the notion of accidental brain injuries. I usually say two things. First, I say the brain is a very plastic, very resilient organ; most kids survive their childhoods with a few knocks on the head and do OK. But I also say that head injuries are nothing to fool around with, and that a prudent trip to the emergency room should be one of the first things parents should consider if their child experiences brain trauma. Optimizing brain development is a complex mixture of prenatal expectations, postnatal experiences, parental involvement — and paying attention to injuries. As Christina Queen of Sweden found out years ago, and as the NFL is just now beginning to realize, a sustained head injury can have vast consequences.

We are going to take a detailed exploration of the relationship between sports-related head injuries and behavioral changes in future columns.

Comments

ONE COMMENT TO “OF PRINCESSES AND FOOTBALL PLAYERS”



Emma says:

March 7, 2013 at 7:41 pm

Very interesting article. I think that too often parents create these narcissistic children by becoming overly involved, uber supportive or “living through” their child’s accomplishments. The parents are overly positive and build up the child’s accomplishments leading them to want that from all of their friendships and relationships later in life. What these parents perceive as loving and supportive actions are actually very harmful to their children. I recently read another article on the topic that I found to be very interesting and informative, <http://www.psychalive.org/2013/03/the-problem-with-narcissistic-parents/>, I highly recommend it!