

Research finds injuries to professional athletes from routine play or practice often reported as 'freak accidents' in me

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(Medical Xpress) -- A new report from the Johns Hopkins Center for Injury Research and Policy finds injuries to professional athletes from routine play or practice are often characterized as “freak accidents” in the media, and fewer than one in 10 news stories on injury events framed as “freak accidents” include a prevention message. It is the first published study examining how the phrase is used in media, and is published in the current issue of *Injury Prevention*.

Given that the news media shape public understanding of health issues, the study authors sought to understand how the U.S. media use the expression “freak accident” in relation to injury events. Three U.S. news sources (Associated Press, New York Times and Philadelphia Inquirer) were chosen to serve as a proxy for the wider news media.

The search yielded a dataset of 250 stories incorporating the term “freak accident” over a five-year period (2005-9), with injuries sustained by [professional athletes](#) dominating coverage (61 percent). Despite being called “freak accidents,” the injuries occurred most frequently during competition (40 percent) and practice (34 percent).

“Framing sporting injuries that occur from routine play as ‘freak accidents’ might be an attempt to cover up the dangerous risk-taking inherent to many sports,” explained lead study author Katherine C. Smith, PhD, an associate professor with the Johns Hopkins Center for

Injury Research and Policy.

Smith and colleagues also examined whether stories included information on how the event could have been prevented. Stories in which the injured person was a professional athlete were less likely than stories about any other injured party to include any prevention content, and stories in which the journalist employed the expression were significantly less likely to include any prevention content versus those in which the expression was used by a quoted stakeholder.

“Journalists who frame injury events as freak accidents may be an appropriate focus for public health advocacy efforts,” said Smith. “Effective prevention messages should be developed and disseminated to accompany injury reporting in order to educate and protect the public.”

Provided by Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health

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