Rosen, Casey

Western University
Steve Di Ciacca & Jane Thornton
In partnership with Rowing Canada & Rugby Canada
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Beyond the Medals: A cross-sectional study investigating retired high performance female athletes' health

The Canadian sport system is committed to enhancing the participation of girls and women in all facets of sport and physical activity. There is a significant knowledge gap in elite female athlete health, particularly long-term. We partnered with Rowing Canada, Rugby Canada and Game Plan to investigate health outcomes in retired elite female rowing and rugby players in Canada to help inform current and retiring athletes of long-term health outcomes and to help progress research and knowledge in this field. We developed an online questionnaire to explore multiple health domains and distributed it through email databases and social media to eligible participants. We collected 74 completed questionnaires (30 rowing and 44 rugby athletes). In our sample, retired athletes had high rates of depression. Relative to each other, rugby players had higher rates of hip and knee injuries and rowers had higher rates of back injuries; however, most participants reported better-than expected current musculoskeletal health. Regarding fertility, 55% of the athletes became pregnant and delivered a child, though the average age of a first-time mother was 3.5 years older than the general population. Two rowing athletes reported a diagnosis of atrial fibrillation, an important finding as cardiovascular outcomes in female athletes are poorly understood. As a reflection piece, the most important health topics to our retired elite athlete survey sample were: mental, musculoskeletal, and cardiovascular health. We will share the results with Rowing Canada and Rugby Canada to raise awareness and help them address the needs of their alumni. We anticipate that this study will help Game Plan better inform their transition-from-sport programs and encourage future research.

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