

**SUICIDE IN PROFESSIONAL
AND AMATEUR ATHLETES**

SUICIDE IN PROFESSIONAL AND AMATEUR ATHLETES

Incidence, Risk Factors, and Prevention

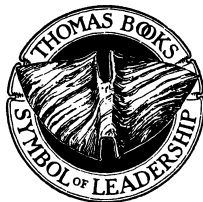
Edited by

DAVID LESTER

and

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(With 7 Other Contributors)



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History tells us that the game and time are [our] two opponents that never lose; decline and defeat are the natural order of sports.

Howard Bryant, ESPN The Magazine, May 28, 2012, p. 10

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PREFACE

Three professional hockey players in the National Hockey League died recently in a period of four months. Derek (the Boogeyman) Boogaard, 6 foot 8 inches tall and weighing 265 pounds, was an “enforcer” for the New York Rangers, paid to defend his teammates and fight their opponents. He died in May 2011 of an accidental overdose of alcohol and the painkiller oxycodone. Rick Rypien, 27 years old, who played for the Winnipeg Jets, committed suicide in August 2011, and Wade Belak, age 35, who had just retired from the Nashville Predators, hung himself that same month.

Commentators wondered whether their role as enforcers – “gladiators,” – played a role in their deaths. They got into fights by design in almost every hockey game. This was how they earned their large salaries. Did this result in neurological damage that might have increased their chances of depression, addiction, and suicide?

More than that, enforcers have a problem with self-esteem. Are they really good hockey players or are they being paid just because they are willing to fight their opponents and because they are good at brawling. They are known as “goons,” and they do not get the respect that the stars of hockey, such as Wayne Gretzky or Sidney Crosby, are accorded. No young boy grows up playing hockey and dreaming of one day becoming a goon!

This book looks at the problem of why so many professional athletes kill themselves, athletes from all sports: race walker Albert Heppner age 29 in 2004; professional golfer Erica Blasberg age 25 in 2010; baseball player Alexis Arguello, who shot himself at the age of 57 in 2009; and Chicago Bears football player Dave Duerson age 50, who shot himself in 2011.

It is not only professional athletes who commit suicide, of course. In 2003, five members of the high school football team in Winthrop, Maine, committed suicide. Over a period of six years from 2003 to 2008, six students athletes in the Council Rock School District (in Newtown, Pennsylvania), four of them wrestlers, attempted suicide. Three died.

Suicide in anyone is a tragedy for the individual and for his or her family, and their deaths often come as a surprise to those who knew them. Suicide in

athletes is more surprising because, to the rest of us, these are the successful members of our society, often looked up to as heroes and role models. Professional athletes make large, and sometimes huge, salaries and lead what seem to us to be glamorous lives. In schools, the athletes are often the formal and informal leaders, given recognition and honors. News of their suicides shocks us.

On the other hand, participation in athletic activities is sometimes urged as a simple and inexpensive tactic for preventing suicide. Physical fitness and healthy competition are seen as facilitating mental health and as protective factors against suicide. Is this wrong?

This book explores the incidence of suicide in athletes and reviews the risk factors that increase the likelihood of suicide in athletes. Research on these risk factors, such as the role of steroids and concussions, is reviewed, and case studies are provided to illustrate these risk factors. Finally, we will discuss the ways in which suicide might be prevented in athletes, both professional and amateur.

D.L.
J.F.G.

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**SUICIDE IN PROFESSIONAL
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Chapter 1

BASEBALL SUICIDES: CASE STUDIES

DAVID LESTER

No group of sport enthusiasts has researched the game as extensively as baseball fans. Members of the Society for American Baseball Research have tracked down every player (more than 13,000 since 1871), checked every box score since the game began, and also recorded the causes of death of each player.¹ It is useful, therefore, to begin this exploration into suicide in athletes with some data on those baseball players who have died by suicide.

In a conference paper, Coleman and Lester (1989) reported that 45 percent of the suicides were pitchers (all right-handers), suggesting the stress of that position. In particular, players who had experienced a sudden decline in performance and who were then out of the game (by being cut or through retirement) seemed to be at high risk. More than half of the major league suicides were players between the ages of late 20s and late 40s, and 15 percent killed themselves within two years of the end of their major league careers.

For example, Don Wilson, a pitcher for the Houston Astros had a 16-10 record and a 2.45 ERA.² The next three years saw his performance slip to 15-10, 11-16, and 11-13, respectively. He died in 1975 from car-

¹ Between 1871 and 1987, 13,123 players and managers in the baseball major leagues have been identified and, of these 6,374 have been verified to have died, with 578 others dead but unverified. Of those deceased, 64 are known to be suicides.

² ERA refers to the mean number of earned runs (as a result of his pitching, excluding errors made by his teammates) given up by a pitcher per nine innings pitched.

bon monoxide poisoning. Donnie Moore, a former reliever for the Los Angeles Angels, struggled for several seasons to stay in the major leagues, and his best year was a 31-save season in 1985, his first year with the Angels. On October 12, 1986, in game 5 of the American League championships, with the Angels one strike away from going to the World Series, he gave up a two-run homer to Boston's Dave Henderson, giving the Red Sox a 6-5 lead. The Angels later tied the game but lost to Boston in extra innings. Boston went on to win the series. Moore remained haunted by memories of that loss and shot and killed his wife during a domestic dispute and then killed himself in 1989. He had just been released by a minor league affiliate of the Kansas City Royals in Omaha, Nebraska.

In his web site www.thedeadballera.com, Frank Russo has listed over 1,100 obituaries of baseball players (and related persons) who have died, including 102 suicides.³ Here is the list, with their age at the time of death in parentheses.

1881: Fraley Rogers (31)	gun
1889: Jim McElroy (26)	morphine or opium
1889: Frank Ringo (28)	morphine
1891: Ernie Hickman (35)	gun
1894: Terry Larkin (?)	slit his throat with a razor
1894: Edgar McNabb (28)	gun
1896: Cannonball Crane (34)	drank poison
1900: Marty Bergen (28)	slit throat after killing wife and two children
1901: Jim Galigan (39)	razor
1903: Win Mercer (28)	inhaled illuminating gas
1904: Dan Mahoney (39)	drank carbolic acid
1907: Chick Stahl (34)	drank carbolic acid
1908: Ike van Zant (32)	gun
1908: Reddy Foster (44)	gun
1909: Nicholas Mathewson (22)	minor leaguer: gun (Christy's baby brother)
1909: Harry Pulliam (44)	NL president: gunshot to head
1910: Ed Strickland (26)	minor leaguer: gun after killing girl friend
1910: Charles Nelson Brown (?)	minor leaguer: gun

³ This list was based on a list compiled by Bill Deane and Richard Topp, members of the Biographical Research Committee of the Society for American Baseball Research (SABR).

1910: James Payne (?)	minor leaguer: gun
1910: Dan McGann (39)	gun
1911: Randolph Blanch	Pennsylvania sports writer: gun
1911: Thomas Senior (32)	minor league umpire: gun
1911: Dick Scott (27)	razor
1914: Charlie Weber (45)	gun
1916: Carl Britton (40)	minor league pitcher
1916: Eddie Hohnhurst (31)	gun
1918: E. F. Egan (?)	minor league manager: gun
1918: Patsy Tebeau (43)	gun
1920: Lou Meyers (60)	strychnine
1921: Noel Bruce (56)	minor leaguer: gun
1921: Clay Dailey (?)	minor leaguer: gun after being cut
1921: Art Irwin (63)	jumped from steamer into Atlantic Ocean
1924: Walt Goldsby (52)	gun
1924: John Wakefield (?)	minor leaguer: after argument with girl friend
1927: Jake Wells (63)	
1927: Bill Gannon (50)	drowning
1927: Danny Shay (51)	
1929: Tony Brottem (37)	gun
1929: Jim Price (60)	sports writer: gun
1930: John B. Sheridan (61)	sports writer: hanging
1930: Zeke Rosebraugh (59)	gun
1931: Con Lucid (57)	
1931: Carl Sitton (48)	gun
1932: Bill Grey (61)	gun
1934: Pea Ridge Day (34)	slit throat with hunting knife after operation failed to restore his pitching arm
1934: Guy Morrison (38)	gun
1934: Charlie Dexter (37)	gun
1934: Sy Sanborn (67)	sports writer: gun
1935: Walt Kuhn (51)	gun
1937: Emmet McCann (35)	gun
1937: Benny Frey (31)	carbon monoxide
1940: Willard Hershberger (30)	slit throat
1940: Charlie Hollocher (44)	gunshot to throat
1941: Ralph Works (43)	gun
1941: Harvey Hendrick (43)	gun

1942: Lyle Bigbee (48)	gun
1943: Chet Chadbourne (58)	gun
1945: Harry McNeal (66)	gun
1945: Hank Eibel (51)	gun
1945: Morrie Rath (58)	gun
1947: Ferdie Moore (51)	gun
1947: Luke Stuart (55)	gun
1948: Jake Powell (40)	gun: at police station
1948: Bert Hall (59)	hanging
1949: Tim Bowden (58)	gun
1950: John Morrison Allen (29)	minor leaguer
1950: Wattie Holm (48)	gun
1950: Frank Pearce (45)	gun
1951: Hugh Casey (37)	shotgun blast to neck
1951: Wally Roettger (49)	razor
1954: Skeeter Shelton (65)	gun
1955: Jim Oglesby (50)	gun
1956: Limb McKenry (68)	gun
1957: Fred Anderson (71)	gun
1960: Gib Brack (47)	gun
1961: John Mohardt (63)	cut femoral artery
1961: George Davis (71)	hanging
1962: Fred Bratschi (70)	drank battery acid
1962: Otto Miller (72)	jump
1962: Cy Morgan (83)	razor
1963: Johnny Niggeling (60)	hanging
1964: Paul Zahniser (68)	gun
1965: Stan Pitula (34)	carbon monoxide
1966: Stover McIlwain (26)	gun
1966: Lew Moren (83)	slit throat
1967: Art Garibaldi (60)	gun
1969: Emil Kush (53)	carbon monoxide
1971: Murray Wall (45)	gun
1972: Del Bissonnette (72)	gun
1975: Don Wilson (29)	carbon monoxide
1980: Dan Thomas (29)	hanging: in jail charged with rape
1989: Virgil Stallcup (67)	gun
1989: Carlos Bernier (62)	hanging
1989: Tony Locadello (76)	baseball scout: gun
1989: Donnie Moore (35)	gun: after shooting wife
1990: Charlie Shoemaker (51)	gun