Opinion: Pro athletes make the case for committed marriages

detroitnews.com/story/opinion/2021/02/13/opinion-pro-athletes-make-case-committed-marriages/6744804002

Vincent Kirkwood

This Valentine's Day, rather than focusing on chocolates, flowers and 5-star dinners, why not think about the impact of lasting love? A solid, committed marriage helps both partners gain focus and stay grounded, through life's inevitable ups and downs — and when a relationship starts before stardom, well, it helps take the edge off fame in a way that changes lives. *(Unable to read the whole story? Sign in or subscribe here.)*

I'm not a famous athlete, but I work with a lot of them. I am, however, in a great marriage that is the foundation of my life. I met my wife, Kelly, in high school. We went to prom together and, years later, when I landed an unpaid internship out of town, she worked retail so we could afford to eat.

It's always been like that – we have our own goals and dreams, while supporting the other, which makes us even better together. It's union and unity that thrusts us forward. Living life as a "we" rather than a "me" changes the whole picture. For professional athletes, that is super important.

Pro athletes who are lucky in love before they become famous have greater success staying grounded, hanging on to their money and keeping clear on what matters as their career soars.

If you depend too much on the adoration of fans for the brief time you're in the limelight, what happens to your self-worth and motivation when it's time to move on?

That may be why the MLB pays a "marriage premium," seeing players as more valuable if they're married. Married MLB players earn 16% more than unmarried teammates. Committing to one woman early and definitively shows a maturity level and a groundedness that single players may not exhibit, so the logic goes.

Finding a supportive relationship early in adult life helps athletes articulate their values. They are less likely to get swept up in the excitement of being famous and more likely to make financial decisions with an eye to a long and productive future, since family transcends fame.

With a committed partner's voice in your ear, what you do does not become the basis for who you are. There are others to think about when the money comes rolling in, so looking at the long-term sets up a solid future.

That helps when it's time to build a second career — and that can come quickly for pro athletes.

Steph and Ayesha Curry are another celebrity athlete couple that get this. They are known for their marriage — for their team effort at life, the energy between them and the way they support one another. Even people who aren't that into sports know the Currys — they their happiness, their partnership and their success, which is based on teamwork.

Marriage settles a professional athlete. It settles anyone, really! For everyday folks, life, work and community can complicate your focus, adding pressures you may not be able to juggle alone. For pro athletes, that increases. A committed partner rides the wave with you and provides sanctuary from the storm of the outside world.

When you're famous, everyone feels entitled to chime in on your life. A steady voice at home becomes the one to listen to.

Many people think a relationship other than marriage can do the trick, but it's not the same. Marriage is a commitment. A covenant. There is a holy aspect to it, and a sense that it can't just disappear in the blink of an eye, despite high divorce rates for professional athletes.

Athletes in America are inevitable role models. Kids look up to famous players. They want to be like them. And if they're known for more than making baskets or hitting home runs, think of the impact on generations of Americans.

When an athlete chooses to be married and makes that a key part of his identity, it shifts expectations for young people. Staying the course, building a family, making happiness a bigger goal than money.

Marriage shifts an athlete's world immeasurably. How might it change if more of us followed their lead?

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