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## Overcoming Stigma: A Champion's Journey to Recovery

A Review of

*Mind/Game: The Unquiet Journey of Chamique Holdsclaw*

by Rick Goldsmith (Producer & Director)

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Reviewed by

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The stigma associated with mental illness, particularly severe mental illness, remains a significant societal and individual problem. This stigma is related to several negative stereotypes about those with mental illness, including being weak, dangerous, and unpredictable, as well as having minimal potential for recovery. Negative stereotypes result in prejudice, which may create isolation and decreased opportunity for affected individuals. Many individuals with mental illness internalize negative stereotypes, resulting in self-stigma that creates chronic feelings of shame, embarrassment, and helplessness. Individuals with mental health issues often either deny there is a problem or try to deal with such problems on their own. There is often a strong need to hide any manifestations of a mental health disorder or, if this is not possible, to self-isolate (Ungar, Knaak, & Szeto, 2015).

Athletes, in particular elite athletes, are especially reluctant to seek treatment for mental health issues (Markser, 2011). This is due, at least in part, to the widely held belief that athletic success requires an individual to be imperviously mentally tough. Since mental health problems are considered by many to be a sign of mental weakness, an athlete experiencing such problems will go to great lengths to deny or conceal such problems. This is unfortunate because being an elite athlete in and of itself adds stress to an individual's life, possibly precipitating or worsening a mental health problem. Symptoms of burnout are reportedly common among athletes (Hughes & Leavey, 2012). Athletic burnout includes such symptoms as emotional and physical exhaustion, declining athletic accomplishment, and eventually diminished interest in the sport (Raedeke & Smith, 2001). Closely related, depression is common in elite athletes, sometimes leading to suicidal thoughts and behaviors (Hughes & Leavey, 2012). Alcohol and other substance abuse is another common comorbidity (Lisha & Sussman, 2010).

Female gender, minority racial status, and lower initial socioeconomic status are characteristics that may increase vulnerability to adverse mental health outcomes for athletes. An athlete with all these characteristics faces several disadvantaging stereotypes. Withycombe (2011) interviewed several African American female athletes about their life experiences. She reported that some felt both empowered and disempowered.

Empowerment resulted from sports success, whereas disempowerment seemed to be related to the life realities, particularly common negative stereotypes, related to being an African American woman.

The genetic base of some forms of mental illness, in particular severe mental illness, has been extensively researched for many years and is now generally accepted. Although some theoretical traditions might predict that stigma would be reduced with genetic causal attribution, one researcher found that genetic attributions increased negative beliefs about the severity, permanence, and inheritability of the mental illness (Phelan, 2005). Bipolar disorder, in particular, is a severe form of mental illness with a likely genetic component that is poorly understood by the public and whose diagnostic characteristics and treatment are still debated by professionals.

*Mind/Game: The Unquiet Journey of Chamique Holdsclaw* presents the story of Chamique, an elite African American female athlete, who was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. Chamique's story aptly demonstrates how the characteristics enumerated above can contribute to debilitating symptoms. Chamique's journey from being a gifted high school athlete to being deemed "the female Michael Jordan" is told through interviews with Chamique, close friends, coaches, relatives, actual footage from Chamique's basketball career, and insightful narration. The video is a 2015 documentary created, directed, and produced by filmmaker Rick Goldsmith, a 2013–2014 Rosalyn Carter Fellow for Mental Health Journalism. *Mind/Game*, begun prior to the fellowship, became his fellowship project. The stated goals of the Rosalyn Carter mental health journalism fellowship include to increase accurate reporting on mental health issues and decrease incorrect, stereotypical information, as well as to help journalists produce high-quality work that reflects an understanding of mental health issues (see [http://www.cartercenter.org/health/mental\\_health/fellowships/journalism\\_faq.html](http://www.cartercenter.org/health/mental_health/fellowships/journalism_faq.html)). These goals are achieved in *Mind/Game*.

As a young girl, Chamique moved from a troubled middle-class home to her grandmother's inner-city apartment because of neglect by parents who were struggling with alcohol and undiagnosed mental health issues. Chamique, a naturally talented athlete, states that she used basketball as a way to cope with anger (presumably at her parents) and distress. Remarkably, this coping strategy put her on the path to fame and fortune. As a high school player, Chamique was described as "the talk of high school basketball." Heavily recruited by colleges, Chamique chose to attend the University of Tennessee, where she was coached by the legendary Pat Summitt. Here Chamique experienced considerable success, receiving many accolades, but also experiencing symptoms of depression that she attempted to deny and then hide. When her father was diagnosed with schizophrenia, she became so depressed that she finally asked for help. At this time, however, Chamique was not yet able to fully confront the negative fallout she assumed would occur if she admitted to what she perceived as mental weakness. She did not follow through with treatment. Instead, she continued to help the Lady Vols win, receiving additional honors, including being named the top U.S. amateur athlete (male or female) in 1998. She won a Gold Medal as part of the U.S. women's team that won at the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games.

After graduation, Chamique joined the Washington Mystics. Here she had her first real experience with losing games, despite continuing her own stellar performance. She mentions in the video that she turned to alcohol for stress relief. And then, her beloved grandmother died. Chamique tried to soldier on, again trying to deny increasing symptoms of distress, but on her grandmother's birthday, she had a serious breakdown, was

diagnosed with depression, entered treatment, and took time off from basketball. Being so much in the public eye, there was considerable interest in her absence, and Chamique finally publicly admitted to being treated for depression. Looking for a change, Chamique moved to the Los Angeles Sparks where her mental health continued to deteriorate despite some ongoing involvement in services. She began to experience extreme highs and lows, eventually becoming desperate and overdosing on her prescription medication. Fortunately, she reached out to a friend, was hospitalized, and survived. This episode is honestly and sensitively presented in the video, primarily through Chamique's own statements: She describes the extreme shame that followed her suicide attempt. She immediately went back to playing basketball and did not tell her team about what had happened. Soon Chamique decided it was time to retire from basketball. After this, she began to speak publicly about her depression, but it appears she may not have understood or acknowledged the severity of her problem. She did become a strong advocate for people with mental illness. After a few years, Chamique decided to return to the WNBA, in part, as she says in the video, to demonstrate that a person could get through mental illness and succeed. She played two seasons, then retired. Chamique turned to writing, telling her story in *Breaking Through: Beating the Odds, Shot After Shot* (Holdsclaw, 2012). She also continued speaking publicly about mental illness, encouraging affected individuals to seek help. However, it was difficult for Chamique to adjust to being out of the athletic spotlight, and her "highs and lows" worsened. One day, she lashed out at her ex-girlfriend, beating with a baseball bat and then shooting at her car. Chamique was arrested and charged, eventually receiving probation and community service. Because the video was still being made at the time of this incident, some moving courtroom footage is included. Back in treatment, she was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. Chamique expresses frustration that it took 10 years to get this diagnosis. However, looking back, she believes that this mental illness also helped her achieve greatness in basketball because she always worked for the "high" that came with winning.

Essentially, *Mind/Game* is not just a video about the journey of a highly gifted, minority by race and gender, fallen and recovering athlete with mental illness. It is not a video about bipolar disorder. At its heart, the video is about the power of mental illness stigma. Chamique Holdsclaw's unique athletic talent and success were not enough to shield her from the stigma associated with societal attitudes toward mental illness; it took an accumulation of pain and negative experiences for her to acknowledge her problem, even to herself, and fully accept the help that had been repeatedly offered. Only then did she begin a process of true self-discovery and healing. The video ends with hope for Chamique to continue on the path of recovery, despite the fact that she acknowledges some continuing struggle with mood issues.

This video will be useful in any public discussion of mental health issues, in college classrooms, and as part of support programs for young athletes. The free discussion guide, available at [https://www.newday.com/sites/default/files/resources/Mind%20Game%20Discussion%20Guide\\_2016.pdf](https://www.newday.com/sites/default/files/resources/Mind%20Game%20Discussion%20Guide_2016.pdf), is an excellent resource for conversation about the issues raised by the video, particularly the problem of mental illness stigma. Missing from the discussion guide is a consideration of the Recovery movement. To be fair, this movement did not seem to have played a major role in Chamique's life during the time period covered by the video. The Recovery movement's foundation is a strength-based model that emphasizes self-determination, illness management, and self-care. Recovery-oriented therapists help the individual to regain a sense of identity that encourages successful functioning while he or she figures out how to live with the mental illness (MacDonald-Wilson, Deegan, Hutchison, Parrotta, & Schuster, 2013). Chamique seems to

have embraced these principles during her own process of self-discovery. In *Mind/Game*, Chamique's journey toward self-understanding, acceptance, and recovery is portrayed with empathy, honesty, and anticipation.

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