

Acing Alcohol Addiction: Tennis Champ Sally Greer Talks Treating Pro Athletes

Sally Greer spent years competing against the greatest players in professional tennis. Little did she know that her toughest opponent would come after she retired from the sport.

By **McCarton Ackerman**

03/14/14

From 1973 to 1978, Sally Greer competed in all of the Grand Slams and major tennis tournaments on the pro tour before her career ended at the age of 23. She went back to college and found success as a local sports anchor and reporter in Florida, but her transition out of life as a pro athlete wasn't as seamless as it appeared. Decades after her retirement from the sport, her drinking morphed into full-blown alcoholism that sparked a hospital detox treatment in 2005. Once Greer got clean, it wasn't long before she vowed to help other athletes do the same.



After going back to school, Greer became a certified addictions counselor. She eventually launched **1 ON 1 Addictions Counseling for Athletes**, which works with athletes at all ages and ability levels, in addition to working at a local community mental health center. Speaking exclusively to *The Fix*, Greer explains why her alcoholism developed after her tennis career ended, how treating top athletes is far different than treating the general population, and what the best course of care would be.

Was your drinking a problem at all during your tennis career?

The alcoholism itself became more of a problem when my career ended. I didn't have my first drink until I was 22 years old. It was at the US Open. I lost a match that I should have won and played horrendously, so I was extremely hard on myself. I went to dinner with my family that night and decided I was going to have my first drink that night. It was a glass of white wine in the basement of a Chinese restaurant. I hated the taste, but as it hit my system, it was like I had discovered a new continent or something. The minute it hit me, I knew I was home.

Once that happened, how did you manage to not start drinking heavily on the tour?

I suppressed it. I didn't become a raging alcoholic for many years afterward, but I have always had an obsessive personality. My first addiction was exercise and the second one was binge eating. My mother had a drinking problem as well. It's not something my family

addresses, but I was there when she would drink in the mornings, so part of it is genetics as well.

For many athletes, their addictions intensify—or really begin—once they retire. Why do you think that’s the case?

A lot of top athletes have no identity other than their sport, and most athletes retire at a young age. When they have to ask themselves who they are or what their purpose is in life, it creates a tremendous amount of doubt and depression and fear. You don’t want to think, so you just start to indulge.

Luckily in my case, I retired at 23 and hadn’t finished college yet, so I went back and studied broadcasting and communications. I went into local broadcasting as an anchor and reporter for sports on the ABC network here and I also had my own local public affairs show. I made something of my life outside of tennis, but there was always the fear they would find out I wasn’t any good. That same fear was there when I was on the tour as well.

I trudged through it and was able to accomplish a lot, but i started to drink more as it became harder to do that. I got married at 26 and had two children, one of whom has Asperger’s Syndrome. My in-laws moved in after Hurricane Andrew and my father-in-law had severe Alzheimer’s. My then-husband is an attorney and worked a lot. I just didn’t have the tools to cope on my own.

What was the point when you knew something had to change?

It was in 2005. I separated from my husband and we divorced. I lost my house and my kids, and my mother died within a matter of three months. And at that point, I was doing a lot of finger pointing and I suddenly realized I couldn’t blame my mother anymore. I called my therapist and told her I was an alcoholic because at that point, I was drinking 24/7.

I put myself into detox in Miami and didn’t know I was addicted to pills until that happened. It was 18 months of withdrawal symptoms because I had been using **Klonopin** and Diazepam for about 12 years.

Once you finished treatment, how did you make the switch into becoming an addictions counselor yourself?

I sat in an AA meeting one day and heard someone say the word “compassion.” I didn’t really know the meaning of compassion and it wasn’t something I had ever really felt towards myself. But something about that word just hit me very hard at that time. I started to have compassion for people around me in the rooms instead of judging and decided I wanted to be there for people who need help. I began pursuing my studies for **addiction counseling** in 2007 and eventually started my own practice.

What are some of the difficulties that come with treating top level athletes?

I'm a staunch believer that pro level athletes are a different animal altogether. I liken them more to the military than I do to celebrities. When we see them on TV, they have to be a risk taker, a problem solver and emotionally balanced. And just like an actor, you have to act like you're confident even if you're not. You have to put in a peak performance every time, even when you're part of a team.

Careers start and end at an early age, so it keeps these kids from having the ability to develop emotionally. It's not all that dissimilar to the lack of emotional development when you pick up a drug. And often times, an athlete's family is dysfunctional because their focus is about them and their performance. The developmental process of an athlete is dwarfed.

Athletes are expected to win, but they deal with losing more than winning and those issues of loss are often not dealt with. That void ultimately gets filled with something, whether it's gambling or sex or overeating. A lot of these top athletes have a skewed view of life because they're underdeveloped adults who have been given entitlements which other people don't have.

There are obviously some well-adjusted athletes like Peyton Manning, but often by the time you get them in treatment, they're really messed up. There was a 21-year-old Major League Baseball player I worked with who was bipolar and in detox for alcohol and drugs. He had just signed a \$40 million dollar contract. How can you be normal after that? How can you live up to \$40 million dollars?

What's the best course of action for treating a top athlete?

You have to do a supervised medical detox firstly, with both clinical and medical professionals. And they need some long-term residential treatment. They need to be with other athletes instead of the normal population. People are going to ask them for autographs in group therapy sessions or ask them what players they know, so the focus is no longer on their treatment. They need to be with people who understand the issues of traveling and being away from their families and constantly being on fight or flight mode. The treatment needs to be encased in an arena, if you will, and you need to take them away from the competing.

The things that athletes have going for them is that they're disciplined and focused and goal-oriented. But we're trained from the beginning to be in control of our minds and bodies. To be told you can't control alcohol or a pill is hard to hear. And pro athletes often need humility. How many have actually shopped for themselves or made their bed or cleaned their room? They need to be humbled, but not in a sense of trying to tear them down. They need to realize their value is not what they do, but rather who they are. If they can find out who they are by staying clean, going to meetings and doing what everyone else does, they can start being accepting of their faults.

As an athlete, you're always performing for the coach or the manager. Even in an individual sport like mine, I was playing for my mother. But when I got sober, it was the first time in my life that it felt like I was doing something for me and not for someone else.