

How my Achilles tendon rupture drives my academic career

Joris Chapon

THE INSIDIOUS BEGINNING

In the winter of 2019, I was 24 years old and in my 12th year of competing in athletics. I had four selections in international competitions with the French national youth team and had four national titles in high jump (figure 1). After two difficult years, I had a good winter preparation and participated at the French National Championships. A little discomfort on my left Achilles tendon arrived insidiously, and at the end of the competition I thought that the pain would go away. I thought that this pain was like many others that I under-rated and neglected. I continued to train as usual as if nothing was wrong, and I planned for two other competitions in the following weeks. The pain did not disappear (but equally did not get worse), and my will to compete was higher than any reason to protect my health.

At the next French National Championships, I felt a sharp pain in my Achilles tendon during the warm-up. I was, however, determined to compete and to reach a medal position. I placed fourth and without any medals but did have a lot of difficulty walking. The pain was very strong, as if a torch was heating up my tendon! I decided to stop my indoor season in order to appropriately prepare for my outdoor season, with my main season goal being the Elite National Championships in my hometown (Saint-Etienne).

IMPATIENCE: THE DESIRE FOR SPORT PERFORMANCE BEAT THE HEALTH PROTECTION APPROACH

I did physiotherapy and my pain remained stable. The summer season approached, and I told myself that I could not miss this season as I had already lost too many seasons before. I saw time passing me by without training and I was afraid to lose more time with the risk of not achieving my season goal. My will to compete was still higher than my desire to protect the integrity of my body. I decided to restart training with the pain but also with daily modifications.

I achieved my second-best outdoor performance in high jump during the



Figure 1 Joris Chapon on 18 July 2013 during the European Junior championships at Rieti (Italia) in high jump. Picture taken by Emmanuel CHAPELLE.

beginning of the 2019 summer season. This good result comforted me in the strategy I had adopted, although after this good performance my Achilles tendon was very painful. I decided to drastically reduce my training and surprisingly, 2 weeks before the Elite National Championships my pain totally disappeared, and I did two specific high jump training sessions without any pain. I was confident again in my tendon, not totally, but feeling it was headed in the right direction.

THE RUPTURE DURING THE COMPETITION SEASON GOAL

At the Elite National Championships, during the warm-up I felt good, in fine shape and in a decent mindset for the competition. But one thing bothered me: I had difficulty 'to put my foot outside of the curve' as I usually would. In high



Figure 2 Joris Chapon on 26 July 2019 during the Elite French National championships in Saint-Etienne (France) just after the Achilles tendon rupture during the high jump competition. Picture taken by Nicolas MENNETREY.

jump, you need to run in a curve to transfer running velocity to the jump. To create this curve, you need to tilt your body and this is done by putting your step outside this bend like a track cyclist with his bike in curve. This is an essential high jumping technical point for me and one that I usually master. In the competition itself, I had no difficulty to clear 2 m, but I did not achieve 2.04 m in my two first attempts. For my third and last attempt in the competition, I said to myself: 'put all you have in this jump to pass the bar and show your shape'. I started my run with only one thing in my head—'put your foot outside of the curve!'. My run was good until the moment I set my foot outside. At this moment, I felt my ankle give away, as if nothing held. I felt my tibia touch the ground. I was afraid. I screamed loudly (figure 2). I knew that it was serious, but I did not think about my tendon until Professor Pascal Edouard told me 'It is probably the Achilles tendon'. My technical failure that I had noticed could have been an indirect sign of my Achilles tendon weakness, but I was overtaken by my desire to compete.

AFTER THE RUPTURE

After the diagnosis, my mind was already looking to the future. I was not afraid, not angry and I had mourned my injury. This state of mind came from my own capacity for resilience, but also from support that I had from my family, friends, coaches and the medical staff. All the medical explanations reassured me and allowed to move forward. There was no taboo in our discussions, and explanations were clear, honest and not fanciful.

Surgery was not the hardest part—the hardest part was rehabilitation, especially the first few weeks. Rehabilitation was mentally difficult because it was not linear: sometimes progression, and sometimes not. All the discussions I had with my physiotherapist pushed me to my limits to make the best of my rehabilitation.

Today, I have totally recovered from my Achilles tendon rupture, and I can practise sport without any limitations. I continue to practise athletics, and have started to high jump again, but I have not yet taken part in any competitions.

MY ACADEMIC CHOICE

This injury made me ask myself about my relationship to sport, and the relationships present between athletics, performance and injuries. I realised that I would like to find answers, and, therefore, I chose to orient my graduate education towards

health and sport. I am now in the second year of my Master's degree and undertaking a research project on sports injury and performance.

TAKE HOME POINTS

During my athletic career, I had many injuries and I always tried to learn from my bad experiences. One advice I can share with other athletes would be that you are not a superhero or a warrior to fight against pain or injury, and competing at all costs may lead to worse injury. I was not a daredevil when I practised athletics, but my choices were sometimes not good, probably by ignorance. I think that education of athletes to injury prevention and management is crucial, as

part of the athlete's development and safe participation.

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