

# It was a freak accident: analysis of the presentation of injuries and deaths in the U.S. press

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# Acknowledgments

## **To the co-authors:**

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Jennifer Manganello, Stephen Bowman & Alicia  
Samuels

## **To the funders:**

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

# Prompt for this study.....

Mike Tyson's four-year-old daughter dies in freak accident - mirror.co.uk - Mozilla Firefox

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http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/top-stories/2009/05/27/tyson-s-daughter-4-dies-in-freak-accident-115875-21392108/

Mike Tyson's four-year-old dau...

## Mike Tyson's four-year-old daughter dies in freak accident

By Anton Antonovics 27/05/2009

### Exodus found hanging from treadmill cord



The four-year-old daughter of boxing legend Mike Tyson died last night when she accidentally strangled herself with an electrical cord.

Little Exodus was found hanging from the flex which was attached to a treadmill in an exercise room at her mum's home.

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Johns Hopkins Center for Injury Research & Policy

# Injury Background

- **Debate over use of the term ‘accident’ in injury prevention lasting nearly 30 years (Baker, 1983)**
- **Langley (1988) identified inconsistencies in usage of the term ‘accident’**
- **Girasek (1999) – survey found ‘accident’ NOT associated with the idea of not being preventable, but predictability was associated with the concept**
- **Davis & Pless (2001) banned the use of the term ‘accident’ in the BMJ**
- **Evans (2003) found no support for ‘accident’ being more problematic among UK health professionals.**

# Theoretical Background

## Framing theory as applied to injury and ‘freak accidents’ Clarke & van Ameron ( 2007)

- Ulrich Beck’s Notion of “Risk Society”
- Media play a huge role in defining how society is seen as ‘risky’
- Media coverage of risk doesn’t necessarily mirror official knowledge
- Who is seen as ‘accident prone’ is socially and historically bound
- Rhetorics of risk reflect power structures – eg. Normalization of car risks

# Why might Injury Prevention and Control be concerned about media depictions of 'Freak Accidents'?

- Does it convey the sense that nothing could be done?
- Does it convey the sense that something like this has never (or almost never) happened before and will probably never happen again?
- Does it suggest that nobody is to blame?

# Research Questions

1. What types of injury event are classified as 'freak accidents' in the news media?
2. Who is using the term 'freak accident' to describe injury events
3. What does describing an injury event as a 'freak accident' *DO*? Is this a problem for injury prevention and control?

# Media analysis

- Print news media serve as a proxy for the overall news media environment
- 3 news sources: Associated Press (national), New York Times (national & local) & Philadelphia Inquirer (local, large city)
- Search: LexisNexis Academic using 'freak accident' as a key word
- 2005-2009 (5 years)
- **Yielded dataset of approximately 400 news stories**



# Coding approach

- Coding categories initially developed by the research team.
- Coding applied by independent, experienced coders – one of whom is a working journalist
- Exclusion criteria: repeat stories on same event, non-human injuries, non injurious events
- Inter-rater reliability calculated pre & post. Kappa >0.75 for all but 1 code (dropped)

# Coding Framework

## Mix of Structured & Open Coding

1. *Freak accident focus of story?*
2. *Source of term*
3. *Description of event & injury*
4. *Medical treatment provided*
5. *Injured person a child?*
6. *Injured person a professional athlete?*
7. *Meaning/Purpose of 'freak accident' in the story*
8. *Inclusion of prevention content*

# Results I

- 140 stories (56%) were focused on the ‘freak accident’ event
- 30 of the stories were more thematic not focused on a specific injury or event
- Within the subset of 220 stories on a specific injurious event. 122 stories (55%) described some kind of medical treatment being provided

# Results II: Who is calling injuries 'freak accidents'?

Journalists	102
Injured Person	47
Coach/Manager	18
Team Member	12
Family Member	12
Owner of place of injury event	11
Spokesperson	11
Involved, non-injured person	6
Not clear or other	30

## Results III – Whose injuries are getting described as ‘freak accidents’? Where are they occurring?

- Professional athletes - 134 (61%)
- Children – 21 (9.5%)
- At home – 24 (11%)
- Children at home – 7 (33%) of children’s ‘freak accidents’ occurred at home compared to about 8% of adult events
- Among the professional athlete’s ‘freak accidents’, 53 occurred during competitive play, 32 during practice, & 21 were non-sports related

# How was 'freak accident' used?

Phenomenological consideration of text organized around 'meanings' and 'purpose' – ultimately create a framing typology for this concept

## Meanings

- Unpredictable
- Unexplainable/Mystery
- Bizarre
- Rare
- Severe
- Not connected to other events

# Meaning of 'freak accident': purpose

## Purpose

- Minimization of event
- Deflection of responsibility of injured person
- Deflect responsibility from owner/manager
- Deflect responsibility from another person involved in the event
- Deny intent

# Unpredictable

*“It was a freak accident,” said the company’s founder, Elizabeth Streb, “It was one of our more benign pieces, if there is such a thing. She just was in a sense too close to the ground to save the manner she was falling.” Ms. Streb said she would not make any immediate changes to the rehearsal routine or performances..... but would think about developing techniques for dancers who have to react in the split second when something goes wrong.’*

NYT 6/2/2007

(about death of a dancer from Streb Extreme Action troupe)



# Mystery/Unexplainable

*“Its still being investigated, but I’m pretty sure that it is going to wind up being a freak accident.”*

AP 9/6/2006

(comment made by police chief investigating child in amusement park being hit by a stray bullet, assumed shot from outside of park)

# Bizarre

*“It’s unfortunate for Paul’s situation because it was kind of like a freak accident, or a freak situation.” (teammate)*

AP 12/124/2009 (basketball injury non-specified during play)

*‘Navarro was heading into the dugout after the second inning and missed a step on his way to the bench, according to the Associated Press. OK, been there, done that. To brace his fall, Navarro reached for something to grab hold of and cut open his hand on the netting designed to protect players from foul balls. It was not designed, however, to protect against clumsiness. “I almost threw up when I saw it,” said Navarro.’*

PI 4/6/2008 (pro baseball player injury to hand)

# Rare

*“He came down on the leg without any contact with anybody. It’s a freak accident, that’s for sure,” said Daly, who had rarely seen anything similar in 24 years of practice.’*

AP 2/28/2007

(basketball injury that will keep the player out for approximately a year – comment made by team doctor)

## Deflection of responsibility of injured person

*‘Marshall said he understands that the public might be suspicious of his explanation, figuring instead that he got hurt in a street fight or in a barroom altercation. But he swore that it was just a freak accident..... “It was just horseplaying , what brothers do.” Marshall said. “We’re adults, I just turned 24 or Sunday. He’s 25. He’s my brother. I love him to death. We were just playing around like usual.”’*

AP 3/27/2008 (pro football player who has an injury that will keep him out of play for 4 months that he says happened when he was avoiding a McDonalds bag and he fell into a TV)

## Deflection of responsibility of injured person II

*“Zumaya was expected to be a key part of the Detroit bull pen in 2008, but underwent shoulder surgery after a freak accident during the offseason. With wildfires threatening his home in Chula Vista, Calif., Zumaya was hurriedly removing treasured items from the attic. Unaware he was holding two boxes above his head at once, the top one slide off and slammed into his pitching shoulder.”*

AP 6/4/2008 (story reporting on return of pitcher to the minor leagues after many injuries in the past years)

# Deflect responsibility of owner/manager/boss

*Headline “1 dead, about 30 hurt in South Carolina bus crash; bus company calls it ‘freak accident’”*

AP 11/19/2007

*‘The family won’t sue because it was “a freak accident” and “accidents just happen” he said’ (father quoted)*

AP 11/25/2005

(2 sisters, aged 11 and 26, were hurt by a parade balloon – story also gives overview of ongoing investigation into how the event occurred)

# Deflect responsibility from another person involved in the event

*“I thought maybe it was a freak accident”, he said. “Maybe the baby slipped under the water for a minute.”*

New York Times 7/5/2007 (11 month baby left with toddler to supervise bath on life support – mother charged with reckless endangerment. Comment made by neighbor who tried to help the mother to revive the baby)

# Deny intent

*“I am a little on the disappointment side. I think Mr. Campbell is in a tough situation on making this decision in regards to the last couple incidents involving the Flyers. I think that he saw my point of view where this was not intentional. This was just a freak accident which unfortunately resulted in injury.”*

PI 10/30/2007 NHL player suspended for hitting a player during play and causing concussion and a broken nose.



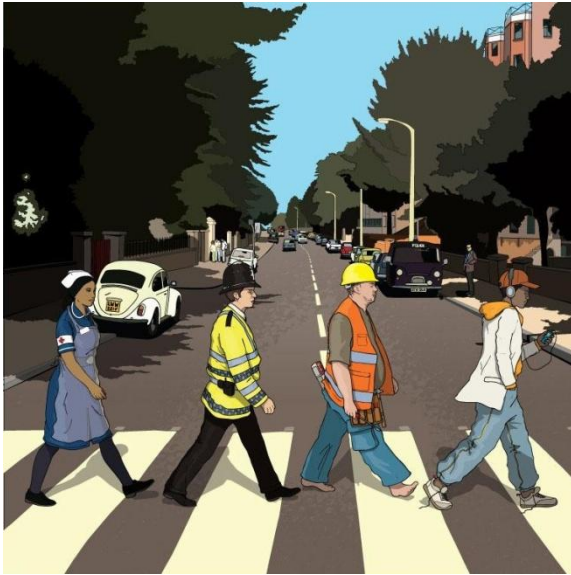
# Review of Main findings

- Professional sporting injuries account for a majority of the ‘freak accident’ stories
- Injuries being labeled ‘freak accidents’ tend to be fairly severe
- The term ‘freak accident’ was employed by a range of stakeholders in the injury event and media coverage of it
- The term ‘freak accident’ appeared to convey a variety of meanings & to serve many purposes

# Discussion and Implications

- Newsworthiness of sports-related injuries & mitigation of normalized risk by framing as ‘freak accidents’
- Key importance of responsibility to how ‘freak accident’ is used not previously highlighted in considerations of accident. Is this a problem?
- Use of ‘freak accident’ to convey newsworthiness of an injury event. Is this a problem?





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