

Confronting Sexual Abuse and Harassment by Sport Coaches: A Need for a National Effort

The world of sports has been riddled with sexual abuse and harassment¹ of young athletes by their powerful and publicly respected coaches (respected for producing performance results) for many decades, across all sports, regardless of sex. While there is no consistently collected data on the prevalence of these transgressions, there is reason to believe that news reports represent the proverbial “tip of the iceberg”:

- “Over the past decade, 159 coaches in Washington have been fired or reprimanded for sexual misconduct ranging from harassment to rape. Nearly all were male coaches victimizing girls. At least 98 of these coaches continued to coach or teach.” (Seattle Times, 2003)
- “Even after getting caught, many men were allowed to continue coaching because school administrators promised to keep their disciplinary records secret if the coaches simply left. Some districts paid tens of thousands of dollars to get coaches to leave. Other districts hired coaches they knew had records of sexual misconduct.” (Seattle Times, 2003)
- USA swimming has had some equally disturbing statistics they released a report in May 2010 that listed 46 coaches that have been handed down a lifetime ban from the sport mostly for sexual misconduct. (ESPN, 2010)
- Additionally USA Swimming **did not** include two coaches who served jail time, two coaches who were arrested and a coach fired from a Division I university. They weren’t part of the 46-person list, published in May 2010 by the USA Swimming NGB amid accusations of lax background checks and minimal safeguards to protect youth. (Colorado Gazette, 2010)

Athletes are often drawn into keeping the secret against their better judgment for the sake of protecting the team from public embarrassment (WSF Coach/Athlete relationships, 1999). As a result, such silence reduces greatly the amount data available to truly understand the scope of the problem.

Sports organizations, from privately owned local sports clubs and teams to national sport governing organizations and national coaches associations, have not been very effective in responding to this

¹ Sexual harassment and sexual abuse are different. Sexual harassment is unwanted, often persistent, sexual attention. It may include, written or verbal abuse or threats, sexually oriented comments, jokes, lewd comments or sexual innuendoes, taunts about body, dress, marital status or sexuality, shouting and/or bullying, ridiculing or undermining of performance or self-respect, sexual or homophobic graffiti, practical jokes based on sex, intimidating sexual remarks, invitations or familiarity, domination of meetings, training sessions or equipment, condescending or patronizing behavior, physical contact, fondling, pinching or kissing, sex-related vandalism, offensive 'phone calls or photos, and/or bullying on the basis of sex. Sexual abuse often occurs after careful grooming of the athlete until she believes that sexual involvement with her abuser is acceptable, unavoidable or a normal part of her training or everyday behavior. It may include exchange of rewards or privileges for sexual favors, groping, indecent exposure, rape, anal or vaginal penetration by penis, fingers or objects, forced sexual activity, sexual assault, physical or sexual violence, and/or incest. (WomenSport International, 2007).

issue. While many sport organizations have policies in place that prohibit such conduct, very little success has occurred with regard to (1) taking action against coaches who violate these policies, (2) implementing consistent programs that educate athletes and parents about sexual harassment and abuse and how to deal with such situations, and (3) creating a climate in which athletes feel safe in reporting such incidents.

These crimes and abuses of power of the teacher/coach often go unreported. When they are reported, few coaches are banned from the profession for violation of professional rules of conduct and, in the case of criminal acts, brought to justice from a legal standpoint. This failure to stop such unethical or criminal coach activity is due to a myriad of factors such as:

- Lack of education of athletes and parents so they understand the nature of sexual abuse and harassment and the fact that such conduct is unethical or criminal
- Athlete embarrassment
- Lack of physical evidence
- Time lapses in reporting
- Coaches owning their own sports clubs and no oversight body to receive such complaints
- Young athletes who seek attention and approval of their coaches and/or who do not understand the “quid pro quo”² nature of sexual abuse by a teacher, coach or someone in authority
- Parent denial
- Lack of effective reporting and investigatory mechanisms
- Conflict of interest – coaches being asked to judge their colleagues or institutions who would rather protect the reputation of their institution than the safety of the athletes they are serving.

The result is athletes across all sports becoming victims of sexual exploitation as consenting or non-consenting minors or adults and coach/perpetrators caught only after numerous transgressions and/or continuing to coach after deals are struck to protect the organization.

It is probably the biggest problem confronting sport today,' says Professor Celia Brackenridge, who has been researching sex abuse in sport for more than 15 years. 'Everyone talks about the perils of doping, but if there were 100 drugs cases under investigation in football, or 60 in swimming, or 40 in tennis, there would be uproar. Yet that's the scale of the problem with sex abuse today.'(Observer Sports Monthly April 2002)

While sports governance organizations and clubs have either added a “code of conduct” to their policies (see USOC Coaches Code of Conduct), implemented policies that require coaches to pledge to not engage in intimate relations with athletes, or established policies that outright state that no such relationships are permitted, these efforts have not stopped the occurrence of coach-athlete sexual abuse or harassment. (see Sandler, 1996; Women’s Sports Foundation, 1999; U.S. Department of Education, 2011)

² Quid pro quo sexual harassment occurs when submission to such conduct is explicitly or implicitly made a term or condition of the victims’ participation in the sport, or is used as the basis for decisions affecting that individual. In the coach-athlete relationship, some examples of quid pro quo harassment are when a coach grants or withholds benefits (such as a scholarship, starting position or playing time) as a result of an athlete's willingness or refusal to submit to the coach's sexual demands.

Even when strong policies exist, many organizations fall short on policy implementation. For instance, in the case of USA Swimming, its policy states that the Executive Director has discretion on whether or not to investigate the claim. Generally, national sport organizations rely on local authorities to carry out investigations. By the time a situation reaches the attention of a national association, too many athletes have suffered such abuse. Or, even if USA Swimming or any national sport governing body (NGB) bans a coach from working in open amateur sport club programs, that coach could become a high school coach and the NGB ban would not become known, even if school performed a background check, unless the coach was previously charged with criminal conduct.

There are simply too many unsolved questions that need to be addressed before we can truly be effective in protecting young athletes from the unethical and possibly criminal actions of coaches:

- When do sports organizations step in to enforce professional conduct expectations and when are local authorities engaged because of possible criminal behavior?
- Should the sports community wait until there is evidence from the local authorities that an act of sexual abuse with a minor has occurred before a sports organization takes action?
- How can we ensure that every athlete is educated about proper athlete – coach relationships, whether a minor or an athlete at consensual age, and understands “quid pro quo” harassment?
- How do we confront the fact that the nature of the crime of rape is such that there is generally a 2-3 year period of time that passes until the victim has the strength to speak about the trauma? This leaves a criminal case very difficult to pursue and very little protection to the non-consenting athlete.
- How do we install systems that effectively confront coach/predator behavior?
- Can we enhance parents’ efforts to protect their children? Only the state of Oregon provides some sort of coach registry where parents and athletes can file a complaint about a coach where that information is made available to the public. Are mandatory background checks effective? Are there other “due diligence” actions that an organization should pursue?
- How can we offer support for athletes that have been victims of sexual abuse or harassment during their athletic years so they can heal from these wounds that can affect them, sometimes for the rest of their lives?
- Is there a neutral party that can be put in place for athletes to gain awareness on how to prevent, protect, and report any suspicious behavior?

Next Steps

To date, the sports community has not been successful in confronting this issue. Coaches associations and national and other sport governance organizations have a built-in conflict of interest in protecting the reputations of their sports or members. There is need for an independent blue-ribbon group of sport, management, psychological, and legal experts to create a comprehensive blueprint for deterring sexual abuse and harassment by coaches in sport. The united effort of the entire sports community is needed to stop these predators.

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