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DEALING WITH PROPER BOUNDARIES, Bullying, Hazing in High School Athletics

Legal Issues

Lessons from the Penn State scandal for scholastic athletics

Coaching

Teacher-coaches – an endangered species?

Sports Medicine

Concussions: developing return-to-academics policies



Dealing with Proper Boundaries, Bullying, Hazing in High School Athletics

BY CHRISTOPHER STANKOVICH, Ph.D.

While most student-athletes in interscholastic sports have a fun, safe and meaningful experience, there are growing national concerns about responsible coach-student boundaries and oversight of students, and the ways in which school leaders react and respond to alleged incidents.

Three specific areas that have received a lot of attention in recent years include inappropriate relationships between coaches and student-athletes, sports bullying and incidents related to sports hazing.

The tragic stories that emerged from Penn State University last November have cast light and raised awareness about how important it is to protect young people. Unfortunately, the crimes committed at Penn State are not the only examples of kids being sexually abused in sport settings, as a quick Internet search reveals literally hundreds of cases nationwide where coaches have breached the trust built within the coach-student relationship, engaging in inappropriate (and illegal) sexual relations with kids. Sadly, the exact number of young people who have been the victims of sexual crimes in sports is impossible to say, as many rape victims never come forward due to shame, fear and embarrassment.

Bullying and hazing are other important concerns relating to interpersonal relationships developed in sports, even if some would argue that it's simply "part of the game" for veteran student-athletes to pick on, belittle or abuse newer students in the program. In worst-case scenarios, victims of bullying and hazing have endured tremendous physical and emotional pain, sometimes leading to mental health problems, reckless means for coping with stress and, in rare occasions, even suicide.

It is for these reasons that school leaders must begin to take more overt and assertive measures in both the ways they screen coach candidates, and develop protocols and procedures for creating safer sports environments.

Reasons why these problems are growing

There are a number of psychological theories why issues with responsible boundaries, bullying and hazing continue to exist in interscholastic sports. First, the typical sports environment is very informal compared to other places where adults and kids interact, like in school. Sports environments are often susceptible to having loose boundaries, casual and coarse language, and even their own set of informal "rules," such as specific hazing acts required for new athletes.

Many would argue that this loose type of environment lends itself to relationships that may develop in different and atypical ways, and actually seem quite normal to the participants involved. For example, when the Penn State stories first emerged, there was a national debate on whether or not it is normal for adult coaches to shower with the athletes they coach. Obviously, this isn't an issue even considered in an environment like school, church or any of the other places where adults and kids typically interact.

A second growing concern pertains to adults who apply for coaching positions today. Unlike just a generation ago when nearly every school coach was also a teacher (and thus held a college degree and was formally trained to responsibly work with kids), many schools today are filling the majority of their coaching positions with non-teacher coaches – individuals in the community who have had little, if any, formal training to teach and guide student-athletes.

Of course, this does not mean to suggest that adults who are not teachers are bad people, or that they are more likely to abuse kids, but it does suggest that today's generation of coaches is very differently trained than in the past, and many of these new coaches may not have the appropriate education or skills to provide responsible and safe leadership for young people (even if they are experts in the X's and O's of their sport).

With fewer teacher-coaches involved in coaching today, schools have had to enlarge

their applicant pool to include non-teachers, or otherwise face the harsh reality that they may need to shut down a specific sport indefinitely until they find a responsible coach to lead the team.

In response to these changes, criminal background checks are being more widely used by schools today, but even that mechanism is limited in scope and fails if the individual applying for the coaching position has not been previously arrested. As disturbing as it might seem to be, with such a desperate need for coaches coupled by the minimal requirement thresholds needed to coach, it could be easily argued that pedophiles are finding youth and interscholastic sports as relatively easy portals to developing inappropriate relationships with kids.

A third area of concern regarding inappropriate relationships between coaches and student-athletes pertains to the amount of training – or lack thereof – coaches receive. In many schools, once a coach is hired he or she might receive a minimal amount of required first-aid training; after that the coach is left to his or her own discretions and autonomy when it comes to providing leadership and oversight of kids.

Unfortunately, school athletic directors are typically too overwhelmed with the responsibilities of running their athletic programs and have little, if any, time and financial resources available to provide training in these contemporary psychosocial issues of boundaries, bullying and hazing. Without educational training, some coaches are never taught about the importance of responsible leadership and how to create a safe team culture.

What schools can do to help

Again, it should be noted that the majority of adults who serve as coaches in interscholastic sports are responsible individuals who do an outstanding job in leading and overseeing their athletes. Still, there are too many reported and unreported incidents that prompt schools to take more direct measures to better protect kids from issues pertaining to inappropriate boundaries, bullying and hazing.

Of course, new protocols and system implementation will involve additional costs and possibly even push-back from coaches who already feel their jobs are busy enough. However, the impact on high school students who have been victimized by sexual predators, or have endured bullying and hazing, is too important to ignore.

Following are some tips and suggestions for creating a healthy sports culture and better protecting student-athletes at your school:

- Raise awareness of these problems any way you can. Unfortunately, there's been an "elephant in the room" in too many cases where school officials suspect something is



going on, yet find it easier to look the other way and hope there really aren't any problems. (Ironically, this is exactly what happened at Penn State.)

- Review your current coach-hiring protocols and look for ways to integrate standardized questions about responsible leadership and how the coach candidate might respond when confronted with rumors about boundary issues, bullying and hazing. Do your coaches know the differences between playful and unsafe interpersonal boundaries, as well as safe team traditions versus unsafe hazing and bullying?
- Provide continuing education opportunities, and make sure that coaches view these programs as enhancements to their jobs – and not punitive measures.
- Develop relationships with local police and other helping professionals who are well-versed in subjects like pedophile behavior, child abuse and bullying. Ask them for specific warning signs they may have encountered in their jobs when working with these situations, and what advice they have for you in case you should encounter a situation at your school (you may want to ask if they can provide an in-service to the coaches at your school).
- Because it is well-known that many victims of sexual crimes, bullying and hazing do not come forward and report the perpetrator, it is imperative to develop safe and anonymous ways for student-athletes to report unethical and illegal behaviors without fear of being discovered or being in a position of retribution.
- Keep in mind there is not one “type” of perpetrator, nor is there one “type” of potential victim when it comes to interpersonal violations. Pedophiles don't always look “creepy,” and kids who are bullied or hazed aren't always “wimps.” Be sure to guard against stereotypes whenever possible.
- Develop rules that guard against coaches developing casual relationships with athletes, especially as it pertains to “friending” kids on Facebook or using text-messaging to communicate. It is also important to prohibit coaches from meeting with student-athletes in unusual and questionable settings, like at a party or at the school well after everyone has left for the day. ©

Dr. Chris Stankovich is a professional athletic counselor and advocate for safe and healthy youth sport participation. His latest educational DVD, *“Tough Topics, Practical Solutions,”* helps school athletic departments with responsible coach/ student-athlete boundaries and the prevention of sports hazing. You can learn more about this video at www.championshipproductions.com and can contact Dr. Stankovich at www.drstankovich.com.

NFHS Offers Free Online Course – ‘Creating a Safe and Respectful Environment’

In an effort to provide information on hazing, bullying and inappropriate relationships to more high school coaches, school administrators and the general public, the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) is now offering its online course *“Creating a Safe and Respectful Environment”* for free on the NFHS Coach Education Web site at www.nfhslearn.com.

Creating a Safe and Respectful Environment, which has been available for \$20 since February 2012, provides education for coaches on the critically important topics of inappropriate relationships, hazing, bullying and cyber-bullying, and the appropriate use of technology when interacting with players and the public. The course provides examples of court cases involving these issues and suggests appropriate actions that coaches should take when these types of issues arise.

Tim Flannery, CMAA, NFHS Director of Coach Education, said with the issues surrounding the situation at Penn State University, the NFHS made a decision to drop the fee for this course in the hope that many more coaches and school administrators become educated on these important topics that negatively affect young people.

“With regard to these important topics of inappropriate relationships, hazing and bullying, we want to educate the masses and change the culture,” Flannery said, “and in order to do that, we thought we needed to make the course available for free.

“This course is about getting the coach's attention and saying ‘You will be held responsible for inappropriate actions and for not taking appropriate steps when these situations occur,’” Flannery said. “Many individuals who accept a coaching job are ignorant of the laws and policies by which they are required to abide. This course will assist athletic programs by providing standardized training for coaches, which will result in a permanent record that can be accessed and verified by the school.”

Since *“Creating a Safe and Respectful Environment”* was made available for free on August 1, about 1,000 individuals a day have been taking the course.

For information on other courses available through the NFHS Coach Education Program, see the article on page 23. All courses are available at www.nfhslearn.com. ©