

ADDRESSING THE ISSUE OF VERBAL, PHYSICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL ABUSE OF ATHLETES

A. GENERAL RATIONALE

All types of abuse can occur in sport as they do in many other institutional contexts such as the workplace, government, religious organizations and the home. Specifically, abuse in sport, whether sexual or not, deters girls and women from participating and developing as athletes. The development and implementation of policies regarding such abuse will help create organizational climates in which women and girls, as well as men and boys, can participate and feel free to report such incidents. Setting policy on verbal, physical and psychological abuse is also likely to decrease the likelihood of such offenses. The Women's Sports Foundation acknowledges that abuse occurs in athletics and seeks to prevent its occurrence through the development of this policy and position statement. Abuse is the willful infliction of injury, pain, mental anguish, unreasonable confinement, intimidation or punishment through physical, verbal, emotional or sexual means. Sexual harassment consists of unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature. Moreover, romantic and/or sexual relationships between coaches and athletes are regarded as an abuse of professional status and power. While this paper does not refer to sexual abuse or harassment, other Women's Sports Foundation resources do.

Leaders of sports governing bodies, educational institutions and athletic programs are encouraged to formulate, implement and evaluate policies on verbal, physical and psychological abuse as unacceptable behavior by coaches toward their athletes or by players toward their teammates. The following policy statement is intended to serve, in part, as a model for sport leaders to adopt and/or adapt in order to meet the needs of their respective organizations and add their own procedures for reporting and responding to abuse. Though the ostensible focus of this policy statement is on coach-athlete and athlete-athlete relationships, the policy should state that it applies to other professionals who work with athletes such as athletic trainers, sports psychologists, officials and sports information personnel.

B. TYPES AND DEFINITIONS OF ABUSE

1) VERBAL ABUSE – The most commonly occurring type of abuse in sports includes

- a) name calling,
- b) hurtful comments regarding performance,
- c) swearing at players or game officials, and
- d) comments meant to demean a person's integrity.

Examples:

- a) Trainer to player: "Fatty, lose some weight so you can actually get down the court."
- b) Coach to team: "You all suck. I thought you were better than that, but I guess I was wrong."
- c) Any and all expletives.
- d) Coach to player: "I hope you aren't proud of yourself. You shouldn't be."

2) PSYCHOLOGICAL OR EMOTIONAL ABUSE – such as but not limited to:

- a) having unrealistic goals or expectations of athletes,
- b) keeping athletes from participating in games or practices because of assumed limits or underdeveloped skills,
- c) issuing threats, or
- d) continually making demeaning statements.

Examples:

- a) A coach putting the success of a team on the shoulders of one "superstar."
- b) Before putting a non-starter in the game, a coach says, "I guess we will have to let you play, you're the only one left."
- c) Coach to team: "If we lose any games this season, none of you will be invited back next year."

3) PHYSICAL ABUSE –

- a) When coaches use any type of hurtful touch causing physical pain;
- b) The use of excessive exercise, denial of fluids and/or imparting unreasonable requests as a form of punishment or a way of creating team discipline.

Examples:

- a) Slapping, grabbing, spitting, shoving, hitting or throwing equipment.
- b) A team loses and the coach demands that his or her players run around the track until they vomit or pass out.
- c) Team returns late at night after an away contest and goes right to the gym for a punishment practice.

4) BULLYING – Bullying is a form of verbal, physical or psychological abuse and includes the deliberate, repeated and sometimes health-endangering mistreatment of one or more persons (the target(s)) by a perpetrator (the bully) whose destructive actions are fueled by the bully's need to control the target(s).

Example:

Bullying is usually an ongoing physical or verbal mistreatment where a “game” of usurping control is an attempt to win while the other loses. Bullying coaches or players may often target more passive players. When the assaulted person appears to be upset, the bully often says things like, “What’s the big deal?” or “She asked for it.”

5) HAZING - Any activity expected by existing team members or coaches themselves of someone joining a team or to maintain full status on a team that humiliates, degrades or risks emotional and/or physical harm, regardless of the person's willingness to participate.

Example:

Instances in which coaches or other players know about or are participants in any harmful or degrading initiation rituals involving new players. Examples of these rituals include walking in cooked spaghetti, running through a line of players who mildly assault the player, performing lewd acts or drinking excessive amounts of alcohol.

The development of any of the above disrespectful relationships between coaches and athletes, or athletes with other team members, compromises the professional integrity of the program and the educational mission of athletics. Such situations greatly increase the chances that an athlete may be personally exploited. Coaches exercise power over athletes, whether in giving them praise or criticism, evaluating them, making recommendations that further their athletic goals or conferring any other benefits on them. In the same way, some athletes may exert power over other athletes as a function of the bullying individual's status, such as standing with the coaching staff, school, sponsoring organization; playing time; media attention; or skill level.

The use of derogatory language and intentionally hurtful statements from coach to athlete or among athletes is wrong because coaches and sponsoring schools have a professional responsibility for the players.

C. WOMEN'S SPORTS FOUNDATION POSITION STATEMENT: ABUSE OF ATHLETES BY COACHES AND/OR PEERS

1. The verbal, physical or psychological abuse of athletes subverts the mission of sports organizations and educational institutions to provide leadership and resources for the purpose of improving the physical, mental and emotional well-being of all females through sport and physical activity participation.
2. Any type of abuse has debilitating consequences both for its victims and for the society as a whole. In the context of athletic programs it lowers the self-esteem and limits the ability of participants to develop their full potential in sports and physical activities. It impairs the future capacity of its victims to experience full athletic participation and to pursue employment and leadership roles in athletics. This, in turn, deprives the society as a whole of the contributions of these individuals and damages a genuine appreciation of participant's athletic achievements and contributions.
3. Abusive behavior of coaches and/or teammates toward other players undermines the professionalism of organized sport, taints the atmosphere of mutual trust and respect between coach and athlete and between teammates, and hinders the fulfillment of the overall educational mission of athletics.
4. In some instances, abuse may expose a school to liability.
5. The Women's Sports Foundation recognizes that this type of abuse occurs in sport as it does in other institutional contexts. In order to effectively deal with cases of abuse in athletics, as well as to prevent future abuse of female athletes, the Foundation encourages officers of sports governance bodies, athletic directors and school administrators to formulate policy guidelines and procedures that include training, distribution of the policy and subsequent evaluation of its effectiveness.

D. WOMEN'S SPORTS FOUNDATION GUIDELINES FOR ADMINISTRATORS CHARGED WITH HIRING AND SUPERVISING COACHES

Officials who are responsible for the administration and oversight of coaches and athletic programs should implement a policy prohibiting any ritual verbal, psychological or physical abuse of any player by a coach or fellow teammate that assaults, belittles or demeans. Suggestions for action are noted as follows:

1. Formulate a written policy that details appropriate and inappropriate behavior of coaches and athletes. The policy should clearly describe potential violations and the sanctions for such abuse. In addition, job descriptions for coaching staff and volunteers should address the issue.
2. Develop and distribute clear rules that prohibit inappropriate behavior of coaches toward athletes or of athletes toward their peers to all coaches and related personnel, potential and actual student-athletes, families, teachers, guidance counselors and others to whom students may tell of such abuse.
3. Provide coaches with information, training and continuing education about how power and dependence can influence relationships and abusive behavior. Upper-level administrators need to take responsibility for organizing educational and training sessions for coaches, staff and players.
4. Develop a complaint procedure for reporting such abusive treatment. Athletes should be given multiple opportunities to report cases of abuse to neutral persons, that is, officials from outside the athletic department; e.g. guidance counselors, school psychologists, school nurses, the campus Health Center, campus Crisis Hotline and Student Affairs might be identified as referral agents. Ensure that these persons have training and know how to respond to such complaints. Procedural guidelines should also recognize that, in addition to needing direction and assistance in order to process the complaint itself, victims may benefit from personal counseling.

5. As much as possible, ensure that procedures for reporting abuse protect the privacy of the athletes and coaches involved. It is helpful to distinguish between informal and formal procedures for reporting such incidents. Informal procedures may involve initial discussion of alleged incidents with athletes, clarification of circumstances and perceptions, counseling and resolution accepted by the harassed person without formal hearings and investigations. Formal procedures incur the filing of an official complaint against the alleged perpetrator usually followed by an investigation and formal finding. Athletes and coaches should be advised of their rights at this time and limitations on confidentiality must be explained. Confidentiality should be retained to the fullest extent possible for both informal and formal reports. Information should be released only on a need to know basis.
6. Ensure that procedures for determining whether abuse has occurred protect the legal rights of coaches and players until an investigation has been completed.
7. An appeals procedure should be developed in the event that the accused or the alleged victim is dissatisfied with the outcome of the investigation or hearing, if appropriate. Coaches or athletes cannot be denied their right to pursue legal redress in a court of law. Administrators need to inform those involved about statutes of limitations, although institutions are at liberty to set longer timeframes for reporting abuse.
8. Policy guidelines must protect coaches and athletes from retaliation during and after a hearing or appeals process. Retaliatory behavior should be viewed as seriously as abuse itself and can occur independently of whether a charge of abuse is substantiated.
9. Respond quickly to allegations of abuse. Take immediate action to ensure that the environment is free of abuse and ensure that an investigation proceeds in a timely manner. Have time frames for how soon an investigation begins, how long it should take, how soon parties should be notified of the findings and how soon sanctions, if any, should be decided and implemented. Have investigatory guidelines to ensure that investigators follow proper procedures for a fair and effective investigation. Provide training for investigators.
10. Prepare a press statement that specifies your organization's verbal, physical and psychological abuse policy. This statement should be posted in prominent places, distributed to all athletes at the start of their season and distributed to staff.

11. Screen all applicants for coaching staff and volunteer positions. The policy on verbal, physical and psychological abuse between coaches and athletes or among athletes should be explained in all pre-employment interviews with all prospective staff or volunteers. Such persons can also sign a statement agreeing not to engage in any physical or psychological abuse or sexual harassment.

E. WOMEN'S SPORTS FOUNDATION GUIDELINES FOR COACHES

1. Coaches have the duty and responsibility to establish and maintain an educational and athletic environment free of abuse of or between their players.

2. Coaches have a duty and responsibility to take seriously and respond to all incidents or complaints of such abuse. Coaches should be required to keep written records of all complaints and know to whom all such complaints should be reported.

3. Coaches should be required to participate in training and educational experiences that enhance coaches' understanding of issues surrounding verbal and psychological abuse.

F. WOMEN'S SPORTS FOUNDATION GUIDELINES FOR ATHLETES

1. Materials about abuse should be distributed to students (as well as coaches).

2. All athletes should be encouraged to immediately report an incident that happens to herself or to another that she believes is a form of verbal, physical or psychological abuse either by a coach or a teammate.

3. Athletes should inquire about their rights to confidentiality before reporting an incident of abuse to a professional. Athletes should be encouraged to discuss confidentiality throughout the entire reporting process. Statements of confidentiality can be made verbally by professionals, but athletes should understand that such agreements do not guarantee that such requests will be honored. Athletes should be advised that it is better to receive such assurances in the form of written policy statements or a written agreement. While schools cannot offer total confidentiality, they can provide a list of people who will be informed. This list

should only be people who need to know. Athletes should retain the same confidentiality rights for formal or informal phases of a reporting process. (See section D5 above).

4. Athletes being recruited at the collegiate level should carefully investigate coaching styles and their personal levels of sensitivity to coaches prone to critical styles of teaching. At the collegiate level, many athletes have control over the teaching environment that she prefers. This is not to excuse verbal abuse but to recognize that some athletes prefer nurturing environments as opposed to environments that include more negative than positive reinforcement. In any case, even highly critical coaches do not have the right to engage in any type of abuse of their athletes.

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The Foundation is located in Nassau County, N.Y. For more information, please call the Foundation at (800) 227-3988 or visit www.WomensSportsFoundation.org.