

Position statements - 6. Sexual exploitation in sport, 2002

FEPSAC Position Statement #6

Sports career termination

Exploitation and abuse in sport has been recognised as an issue only within the past two decades. Awareness of both sexual harassment and sexual abuse grew as a consequence of initiatives for gender equity in sport in the 1970s and 1980s; emotional and physical abuses are under-researched but have also been highlighted in studies of the elite level of athlete performance. There is an emerging body of knowledge that now underpins both harassment-free sport and child protection policy initiatives. These initiatives should have practical benefits for all athletes.

Sport frequently involves close personal relationships, both among groups of athletes and between individual athletes and their coaches or leaders. There is evidence of high levels of bullying between athletes, sometimes serious enough to cause an athlete to leave his or her sport. The trust that develops between the athlete and leader is often regarded as an essential part of training for success. Sometimes, however, more powerful individuals take advantage of those with less power, using demeaning sexually harassing behaviour - such as sexist jokes or unwanted touching - or in the most extreme cases abusing them sexually, emotionally or physically. In the most serious cases it is thought that the abuser is motivated by a desire to control the athlete: they may thus use sex to achieve and maintain power, rather than power to achieve sexual gratification.

Sexual exploitation and gender

Sexual exploitation affects both males and females athletes and may be perpetrated by both adult authority figures and by athletes themselves. Given the gender distribution in sport, and the over-representation of males in coaching and other authority positions, it is much more likely that perpetrators of sexual exploitation will be males. This is reinforced by research findings. The sexually abusive coach is frequently a kind of 'father or mother figure' for the young athlete, especially where the child's natural parents are either absent or show no interest in their sporting progress. Homophobia is linked to sexually exploitative behaviour, often where the perpetrator is him/herself uncertain about their sexual identity and seeking to reinforce their own perceived boundaries between the acceptable and unacceptable. Sexual exploitation can also occur in group settings where senior athletes engage rookies or newcomers in bullying, physically challenging or sexually explicit rituals as part of hazing or initiation rites. Such rituals have been observed in some women's sports but are much more commonly associated with male sports, especially traditional team sports.

Sport as a protection from sexual exploitation

In addition to its health and fitness benefits, sport has long been promoted as a medium for the development of self-confidence and assertiveness. Physical fitness helps to develop self-confidence and this, in turn, can assist with building an individual's capacity to resist sexually harassing behaviours. Self-confident athletes with strong family support are less likely to exhibit the vulnerability that marks out a potential victim of a sexual abuser. Each sport has developed its own culture and norms. In some sports, training in deference to authority and respect for the rules helps to instil norms that protect athletes from sexual exploitation. Athletes whose lives involve a mix of activities and who enjoy a balance between academic studies, sporting practice and social pursuits, are also less likely to become dependent upon a single individual who might draw them into a sexually abusive relationship.

Sport as a site of risk of sexual exploitation

There may be a proportion of young athletes in any club who have suffered sexual abuses in their family and these individuals require particular support and care in order to avoid them being targeted a second time. Sports which involve early peaking i.e. where elite level performance is reached in the lower teenage years, at or around puberty, are thought to present more risk of sexual exploitation to athletes than those sports with higher peaking ages, since this time coincides with the transition from child to adult during which sexual identity and maturity are achieved. At the club level, young athletes may fall prey to their 'sporting

idols' in whom they may place unqualified trust. At the elite level, young athletes are often expected to accept responsibilities that are more usual for adults, such as travel arrangements and money management. Their athletic development or 'sport age' is thus well in advance of their social and physical development, which can create tensions and sexual uncertainty.

Sport psychologists have a special role to play here as they are in a privileged position to spot early signs of distress and abuse as part of their professional practice. Indicators of possible abuses suffered by athletes include: sudden mood swings, changes in behaviour or performance standard, loss of enthusiasm for sport, misleading or telling lies about their whereabouts, development of addictions and/or disordered eating patterns, social withdrawal, uncharacteristic exhibitionism or unusual sexual knowledge for their age. The sport psychologist can also work with coaches to ameliorate the effects of autocratic coaching styles and, in this way, minimise the chances of abuse by coaches and other authority figures in sport.

Four dimensions of protection from sexual exploitation in sport

Sports psychologists should attend to four dimensions of protection in relation to sexual, physical and emotional abuse:

1. **Protecting the athlete from others:** recognising and referring to legal and/or medical authorities anyone who has been subjected to sexual misconduct or abuse by someone else, whether inside sport (by another staff member or athlete) or outside sport (by someone in the family or peer group);
2. **Protecting the athlete from oneself:** observing and encouraging good practice when working with athletes in order to avoid perpetrating neglect or abuse of any kind;
3. **Protecting oneself from the athlete or others:** taking precautions to avoid false allegations against oneself by athletes or their peers or families;
4. **Protecting one's profession:** safeguarding the good name and integrity of sport, coaching and sport science.

Recommendations for minimising the risk of sexual exploitation

1. adopt harassment-free policies and procedures that are in line with international ethical and human rights statutes;
2. encourage open debate about sexual harassment, homophobia and exploitation of women and men in sport;
3. embed both an equitable balance of males and females in all roles and also democratic leadership styles to mitigate against abuses of power;
4. act as advocates of harassment-free sport through education and training programmes for every member of the sport;
5. actively monitor the effectiveness of all anti-harassment initiatives;
6. initiate research into men's, women's and children's experiences of abuse and bullying within their sport;
7. give active representation to athletes in decision-making at every level of the sport.