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COACHING EDUCATION

Abusive Koaches:* "There Ought to be a Law!.... Oh, Wait! There is!"

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To fully understand this paper, the reader should know:

- youth/child is defined as anyone age 18 or under;
- level of sport includes recreational, developmental, and competitive sport in both scholastic (school) and private (club) participation; and
- *'*koach*' is purposefully spelled with a 'k' because, just as 'krab' salad, both refer to a weak imitation of the real thing.

'*The mind that becomes soiled in youth can never again be washed clean.'* Mark Twain

Abstract

The abusive koach has become an all-too-familiar issue at every level of sport. While sexual and physical abuses have justifiably received most of the notoriety, psychological abuse (PA) and emotional abuse (EA) by koaches are more common and often ignored, minimized, or excused 'as part of the game.' The purpose of this paper is to examine the concept of abusive koaches by reviewing the importance of the player/coach relationship, providing legal and practical definitions of PA and EA, presenting the causes of abusive koaches, and demonstrating the legal and ethical duties of the administrators who oversee them. The author concludes with practical recommendations for the actions

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needed to reduce the occurrence of PA or EA and eliminate those who are guilty of either.

Introduction

Abusive coaches and their treatment of athletes have become an all-too-frequent occurrence in sports. The abuse occurs at every level and too often it is either ignored by those responsible for the psychological/emotional welfare of athletes or excused for some reason, such as:

- "Oh, but the team wins!"
- "The coach does that to motivate the team."
- "The player is just overreacting and probably deserved it."

While '*koaches*' are often identified as guilty of emotional/psychological abuse, those who oversee them, and do not intervene, are as guilty as the abusers (Stratum, 2020). Both coaches and their 'bosses' (school principals, athletic directors, club officials, and board members) are legally defined as caretakers and, as such, are obligated to report the abusers in their organizations to legal authorities. The purpose of this article is to review the context in which most abuse occurs, the legal definitions of emotional/psychological abuse, its occurrence, the characteristics of the abusers, and the ethical/legal repercussions of those who allow the action to continue. It is concluded with practical recommendations for the identification and elimination of the abusive '*koach*.'

Literature Review

The Coach/Player Relationship

Jowett and Cockerill (2003) described the player/coach relationship as one that both parties have purposefully entered. The degree to which that relationship is positive, exhibiting mutual respect, sincere communication, and common athletic and personal goals will affect the physical and emotional well-being of all parties. Additionally, it will likely impact both individual and team performances. The relationship's effectiveness will depend on how *success* is defined in the athletic program. Historically, the relationships between coaches

and their players are the substance upon which the effects of participation, success, and well-being are determined (Smoll et al., 1978). According to Jowett (2003; 2005) the player/coach relationship is the most important interpersonal bond in sport and is foundational for many of the positive results of participation. She noted that dynamic and complex partnerships can be either positive, characterized by mutual appreciation, respect, and gratification, or negative. Negative relationships often result in harmful experiences and impact the players' well-being. To ensure a positive relationship, elements such as empathy, honesty, support, acceptance, responsiveness, friendliness, cooperation, caring, respect, and positive regard must occur (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003; Jowett & Meek, 2000). In contrast, negative relationships habitually involve coaches who display indifference and lack of interest in the individual athlete. Those 'koaches' are often remote or even antagonistic, deceitful, tyrannical, and guilty of verbal, physical, and/or sexual abuse (Brackenridge, 2001; Jowett, 2003). The discord often originates from a coach's leadership style that exhibits a dominant personality, poor and/or negative communication, distractive and harmful training practices, and a top-down leadership style based on power (Jowett, 2003). These 'koaches' fail to acknowledge that players' perceptions of their relationships are based upon human affective, cognitive, and behavioral elements occurring simultaneously at every coach/player interaction (Jowett, 2001).

Ironically, the relationship between coaches and players directly affects the primary goal of most sports: the achievement of individual and team performance. That goal is the production of positive outcomes by combining improvement in skills and tactics with individual and team cohesion in competition. But to achieve that level, coaches must understand and accept that strong, yet respectful relationships between coaches and athletes must include mutual trust, understanding, and confidence. The coaches' abilities and willingness to listen, communicate, and prioritize the total welfare of the young athlete are essential (Bissett & Tamminen, 2020). Conversely, negative relationships may affect individual and team performances, coaching satisfaction, and player attrition and can often prompt legal and civil actions against organizations and their leaders (Greenleaf

et al., 2001; Hemery, 1986; Jowett & Cockerill, 2003; Vernacchia et al., 2000).

According to the National Federation of High Schools (NFHS) (Amaro, 2021), coaches in their organization are responsible for more than team and individual performances. In addition to their customary duties, coaches should be role models, advocates, and parent-like individuals with mandated responsibilities, including reporting any abuses they observe. Most districts have the resources to train school personnel on the legal obligations of their roles when working with student-athletes. These programs typically address signs of abuse, harassment, and the mental health of athletes and are offered at no cost through the NFHS Learning Center.

Bissett and Tamminen (2020) described constructive coach/athlete relationships as those that exhibit strong yet respectful levels of trust and understanding. Those relationships reflect common goals that include clear and honest channels of communication in a climate where all parties may express their opinions and feelings sans repercussions. Only in this environment can mutually clarified goals be pursued and achieved (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003; Lyle, 1999). Jowett (2005) concluded that the effective coach/athlete relationship is holistic. At its best, it is complete, well-rounded, and dependent on the commitment and maturity of all parties. Yet, accomplishing that 'perfect fit' between coaches and players is difficult because of the many variables that impact both groups.

Psychological and Emotional Abuse Defined

Psychological abuse (PA) and emotional abuse (EA) in sports are well documented internationally. Ridner (2004) defined PA as "the unique discomforting, emotional state experienced by an individual in response to a specific stressor or demand that results in harm, either temporary or permanent, to the person" (p. 539).

Mountjoy et al. (2015) provided various sources for identifying types of PA and EA. They included the International Olympic Consensus Statement (Ljungqvist et al., 2008) on sexual harassment and abuse in sports, the Olympic Movement Medical Code, and a consensus paper on Youth Athletic Development (Bergeron et al., 2015).

Unfortunately, emotional and psychological abuse in youth sports may be the most prevalent type of mistreatment identified (Alexander et al., 2011; Bergeron et al., 2015; Raakman et al., 2010). Alexander et al. (2011), surveyed more than 6,000 youth participating in organized youth sports and found that 75% had been emotionally abused by their coach. In the *Consensus Paper on Youth Athletic Development*, Bergeron et al. (2015) presented a summary of the literature on the threats to children within sports. They found that emotional abuse may be the most prevalent concern within youth sports. *The Olympic Movement Medical Code* (2009) underscored that all stakeholders in sports affirm that no athlete should be endangered by their participation and that their physical and emotional health should be protected with respect, fair play, and sports ethics. It is the responsibility of every adult in a sports organization to take the measures necessary to protect the health of athletes and minimize the risks of their physical injury and/or psychological-emotional harm.

In the United States, Brassard et al. (2020) defined psychological abuse as a caretaker's repeated behaviors that impede the safety, socialization, emotional and social support, cognitive stimulation, and respect of an individual. Such abuse conveys to a young person they are worthless, defective, damaged, unloved, unwanted, or endangered. The negative behaviors assault many of the basic needs of youth, are insidious, and often enacted by those whom the victims trust (e.g., parents, family, school personnel, peers, coaches, and mentors).

Even more destructive to the athlete is that PA/EA usually does not involve easily identifiable visual actions and is difficult to document. Koaches who insult, threaten, mock, swear at, ignore, isolate, or exclude young athletes from meaningful events are examples of abusive behaviors (Brassard et al., 2021). When they occur in the developmental periods of young athletes, they often result in early adult psychopathology.

Legal Definitions

The legal aspects of abuse in sport have been addressed at various levels. Internationally, Brackenridge and Fasting (2008) reported that all sports organizations have a moral, ethical, and legal duty to adopt strict programs to protect athletes' physical and mental well-

being. In a consensus document from the International Olympic Committee, representatives of the U.S. and 12 other countries determined that abuses in sports usually originate from the power relationships between coaches and their athletes. The members stated that no sport, regardless of its performance level, is immune to abusive power relationships. Abusive behavior is a violation of human rights, regardless of its setting, and not only do the young athletes suffer, but the organizations' leaders who allow it may bear the ethical, financial, and legal consequences. In the United States, the Federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (2012) defined any abuse resulting in physical or emotional harm to a child and/or failure to act by a parent as illegal.

The study of the abuse of youth in sports is global yet highlighted more at the international level than in the U.S. (Kamal et al., 2019). Within the U.S., each state is responsible for determining child abuse and neglect, with many defining the four major types of maltreatment as neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse, and emotional abuse (Moxley et al., 2012). Most states have enacted laws and policies that define their responsibilities in protecting vulnerable youth from abuse and neglect. Issues addressed in laws include mandatory reporting, screening reports, proper maintenance, and disclosure of records. Accordingly, Logan and Cuff (2019) identified coaches and related sports administrators as 'caretakers' of athletes and, as such, are legally and ethically mandated reporters of any abusive behavior. Most states have severe penalties for both abusers and those who fail to report them to legal authorities (Stratum, 2020).

Conclusion of Legal Aspects

The lack of attention and responses to abusive koaches at all levels continue to be documented nationally. A simple search of the internet can document the abundance of cases of the abusive 'koach.' While unfortunate, it is necessary to include both the legal ramifications of those who abuse youth in sports and those who fail to report or even address such actions. The unending behaviors of some koaches and their administrative superiors are negatively affecting too many athletes at all levels. This abuse of younger athletes continues to be a common, yet undocumented, occurrence that many caretakers ignore or excuse (Stratum, 2020).

Origins and Characteristics of the Abusive Coach

Recently, Morbee et al. (2020), Fasting (2021), and Pulido et al. (2021) examined the origins and characteristics of the abusive koach. They labeled koaches' abusive behavior as non-accidental violence in sport and identified these as causational factors:

- gender of the coach;
- power relationship with their athletes;
- competitive sports environment; (*as an evaluative context*)
- growth of sports in the private sectors; and
- lack of coaches' educational preparation.

According to Fasting (2021), both genders exhibit abusive coaching behaviors. However, since males comprise much of the coaching profession, it is not surprising that males comprise the majority of abusive koaches (Knoppers, 1992; Matthews & Channon, 2020; Mohapatra, 2021). Those sources reported male hegemony, i.e., the control, domination, and power that exists in the coaching position, as a primary origin of abusive behaviors. Brackenridge and Fasting (2008) highlighted the 'power relationship' and its exploitation as underlying the abusive behaviors of coaches. Koaches who are 'controlling' often exhibit non-accidental violence, such as verbal abuse, belittling, bullying, threatening, shouting, and even physical punishment to control athletes' behaviors. Some of these 'controlling' koaches even believe their authority justifies imposing their will on the personal lives of their athletes. Such a high-pressure context not only relates to negative outcomes but may predict future coach-athlete relationships (Lundkvist et al., 2012). Negative coaching behaviors often result in athletes who exhibit competitive anxiety (Ramis et al., 2017), poor motivation (Haerens et al., 2018), and increased symptoms of burnout (Barcza-Renner et al., 2016). These represent causes that negatively impact both the health of athletes and their performances in competition.

The competitive sports environment of coaches and athletes has been labeled in an *evaluative context* (Morbee et al., 2020). In that context, coaches at every level are constantly evaluated by parents, administrators, boosters, and a society that places an overt importance on winning. When the primary measure of athletic success is winning, coaches are placed in a position of constant appraisal.

During any season, the evaluation process by external sources occurs regularly and too often based upon factors over which coaches have limited control. In this situation, many coaches experience the frustration of loss of personal autonomy, affinity, and competence. In the *evaluative* environment, coaches may respond by developing a controlling or pressuring style. Unfortunately, that transition can adversely affect the relationships with their athletes, and ultimately the performances of their teams.

Simultaneously, the explosive growth of youth sports in the private sector contributes to the evaluative nature of coaching (Merkle, 2013). Private sports associations and clubs have added to a sports environment obsessed with both winning and striving to elevate a minority of young athletes to higher levels of play (Westfall et al., 2018). Those advanced stages might be as simple as a specific position on a team such as quarterback, point guard, or striker, or as elevated (yet improbable) as college athletic scholarships or professional careers. Administrators in private sports clubs and associations foster and depend on those goals as a rationale for extended seasons, early sports specialization, and the increasing costs of their existence. The expansion also affects coaches' education (Gregory, 2017). Historically, most coaches were trained and employed as teachers in the schools where they were employed (Woodall, 2017). That is no longer the case. Initially, most coaches in the private sector were volunteers. Their responsibilities were limited with fewer obligations for extended seasons and expensive travel. Now, the need for coaches has grown and with that expansion, the needed resources in time, money, and dedication have expanded. Unfortunately, many of the coaches in the private sector have neither the resources nor the commitment to be involved in any form of comprehensive and ongoing coach education. Some private organizations do not require any educational preparation. Of those who do, their limited curriculum often has little basis in scientific knowledge (Hedstrom & Gould, 2004). Those authors reported less than 20% of the millions of youth coaches and less than 8% of high school coaches had any formal training in the non-sport-specific areas related to coaching. Even over 30 years, the formal preparation of coaches from high school (Stewart & Sweet, 1991) to college levels (Stewart & Koch, 2020) has not educationally progressed in any noteworthy manner.

In the 1991 study, many of the high school coaches surveyed were not successful in answering questions about basic first aid and/or a coach's legal responsibilities. Thirty years later, Stewart and Koch (2020) found that while over 90% of coaches from a major D-1 conference reported having college degrees, they had majored in non-sport-related disciplines like business, communications, or general studies. In surveying current and former athletes, coaches' lack of basic teaching skills was repeatedly reported as a characteristic of 'worse' coaches (Stewart, 1993; 1994; Stewart & Taylor, 2000). Logan and Cuff (2019) determined that many coaches may initially aspire to higher standards, such as sportsmanship, personal responsibility, work ethic, and other non-athletic components in their positions. Unfortunately for some, many factors have eroded the pursuit of those goals. The reduction of teachers as coaches, the excessive costs in time and money, and the primary determinant of success as winning, cause many to redefine their goals or ultimately quit the profession. Some who remain become coercive or punitive, encourage unsportsmanlike behavior or attempt to impede their players' social and personal development in pursuit of winning.

Those negative, abusive koaches often resort to motivational tactics, such as yelling, belittling, insulting, or name-calling, to a point where nearly half of the young players' attrition from sports was due to coaching misbehaviors (Shields et al., 2005; Stewart, 1993; Stewart & Taylor, 2000).

The Need for Education in Positive Coaching

The need for positive, ongoing coach education has never been greater. Yet, the status of coaching and coach education in the U.S. is still best described by Crum (2001):

> Metaphorically speaking, never before have there been so many ships sailing on the sea of sport pedagogy research. However, it is a serious problem that too many of the helmsmen do not know the direction they are heading or the cargo they are transporting. Consequently, they are not able to inform fellow sailors about their compass courses or the practitioners on shore waiting their cargo about where and what they are going to unload. (p. 185)

Twenty years later, Carson and Walsh (2021) addressed the ongoing need for quality coach education. They noted that coach education has, unfortunately, been focused on the higher levels of coaching and overemphasizes 'what' to deliver with minimal attention on the 'how' to deliver it. The limited development of coach education at the grassroots or novice levels of sports is regrettable. It is at those entry levels where knowing ***how*** to coach (***teaching***) is more important than ***what*** to coach (***skills and tactics***). Understanding the methods of teaching would empower coaches to become focused more on holistic athlete development than on winning. Unfortunately, the loss of teachers who coach continues to be a serious problem.

In an administrative conference dedicated to drastic changes in public school coaching, Woodall (2017) addressed the challenges of finding and mentoring the numerous non-teaching coaches that exist in public and private schools. The loss of teachers willing to coach in their own schools was specifically noted. The hiring of individuals outside of the educational arena identifies weaknesses in coaches, such as the characteristics of young athletes, the basics of teaching, and the coaches' willingness to learn, accept, and follow program rules and directives. Overworked athletic directors and/or other administrative staff in the schools have had to assume the additional tasks of educating, mentoring, and overseeing those coaches who are not teachers. When educating novice coaches, there is a need to be concerned with how they coach the athletes as much as what they coach them. In 2014, Stewart surveyed high school sports administrators (athletic directors and principals) to determine the reasons they had dismissed coaches in the past five years. Nearly 50% responded that poor teaching was the primary cause of the coaches' dismissals. In other work by Stewart et al. (1992; 2000; 2011, 2014), students in an introduction to coaching classes, the majority who had been or were still athletes, ranked ***being a good teacher*** as their first preference in a coach. In addition, they described their worst coach as one who was negative, arrogant, yelled, played favorites, was a poor teacher, and lacked knowledge even in the sport of being coached.

Recommendations

The reduction and elimination of abusive koaches is a multifaceted journey that impacts the entire context of sport (Morbee et

al., 2020). It is a complex endeavor that is highly dependent on unified efforts to succeed. Coaches need both formal and informal education in the non-sport-specific components of positive coaching. Their primary education must be grounded in a supportive philosophy that puts the holistic welfare of the athlete first. Supplementary (and ongoing) education should be directly related to the 'context' of the position. There are multiple levels of coaching that have unique goals and aspirations. Sport at the entry level should be recreational where the primary goal for the young athletes is having fun. Later, sports may evolve to a developmental level where the skills, strategies, and rules of the sport are taught while maintaining a 'fun,' positive environment. Ironically, even in some programs at higher levels (freshman, junior varsity, etc.) or the U.S. Olympic Development Programs (ODP), developing skills and strategies should be more important than winning. Success at these levels should be determined by the athletes' progress and a lowered attrition rate. Winning becomes more important, but still is not the primary goal of participation. It is not until the higher levels of sport, where winning is essential to progress to a later stage of competition (regional or state tournaments; national championships; bowl games in the U.S. or international competition like the Olympics or World Cup) should success be determined somewhat exclusively to 'winning.' As sport reaches those higher contextual levels, coaches will experience more intense relational tension (Morbee et al., 2020) and must be prepared. Likewise, those coaches at the entry and developmental levels must cultivate skills and behaviors that reflect those differences. Coaches who have the mindset of the advanced levels of play, but coach at an entry or developmental level, will more likely experience the frustrations that lead to negative behaviors and/or coach attrition.

Specific Codes of Conduct

The primary administrative step at the entry level of any coaching position is the commitment to a well-developed code of conduct that coaches must agree to and to which administrators hold them accountable. The development of such codes should be a unified effort involving administrators, coaches, and athletes. Anshel (2003) noted that player input is extremely valid in providing feedback as to all aspects of an athletic program. In that vein, Kerr et al. (2019) presented a series of recommendations provided by former national

team athletes as to the content and atmosphere of any code of conduct for coaches. The following is an abridged version of those recommendations:

- The most frequent recommendation was the implementation of a third-party, neutral, independent body where athletes can go when they feel they have faced abuse, discrimination, and/or harassment.
- This independent body must be completely disconnected* from coaches or athletic directors, providing a site where athletes can disclose any negative experience and receive support even if they choose not to submit a formal complaint.
- *Too many members of an athletic coaching staff (including the director) have a self-interest that affects their ability to remain non-biased.
- That body should be neutral and contain individuals who are knowledgeable in both the codes and current laws related to abusive behaviors.
- The code and the committee should be prepared to address all forms of abuse with special emphasis on the prohibition of any intimate or sexual relationships between staff and athletes.
- There should be ongoing education containing the ethical and legal issues related to abuse that is required of all stakeholders on a regular (annual) basis.
- It should contain evidence-based information about the effects and abuses of power in the coach/player relationship and the role of the coach as a teacher.
- The educational process should emphasize the 'implicit cues' that often pressure athletes *not* to disclose any behaviors because of the negative effects on the school, club, and its administrators.
- The administrators in charge of the programs should strengthen accountability measures of all employees of the athletic programs with specific examples of abuses, and the repercussions to those who abuse athletes.

- The athletes in the programs should annually be asked for their anonymous input concerning the nature and quality of their athletic experience.
- There should be immediate access for athletes to support personnel who have the resources needed to assist and support victims of maltreatment.
- A final recommendation was the need for a recommitment to the primary goals of sports participation away from a performance model to the enhancement of the athletes' physical, mental, and emotional well-being.

Conclusions

According to Amaro (2021), coaches are responsible for numerous aspects of their programs. In addition to the standard responsibilities, coaches should be role models, advocates, and parent-like individuals who have mandated responsibilities as reporters of any abuses they observe (Lyle, 2019). Many of these topics are covered in courses available for free through the NFHS Learning Center. Unfortunately, there is little to no administrative oversight as to compliance, much less the effect of educational efforts (Stratum, 2020).

When done correctly, coaching is a privilege (Mills & Mayglothling, 2021). Along with its many athletic and legal responsibilities, none is more vital than the moral/ethical development of the athletes (Lyle, 2019). Striving to achieve moral excellence in an ethical and empowering manner should be one of the primary goals existing in the player/coach relationship. In Mills and Mayglothling's (2021) opinions, coaches should know why they coach, what behaviors they should exhibit, and how their total being impacts the relationships with their athletes. Shields and Bredemeier (1995) identified honesty, trustworthiness, and fairness as the norms in coaching behaviors, not the exception. Coaches who place 'me' over 'we' in the player/coach relationship are likely to be viewed negatively and determined to be a coach who is more self-supporting, exhibiting a top-down power relationship with their athletes.

The coaching of any competitive activity is unique. Unlike the professions of teaching, medicine, or law, coaching is usually entered into with little or no formal education that addresses its requisite components. There are no specific qualifications to coach sports in the Unites States. Yet, legal, ethical, and professional obligations are

expected of each coach whether a volunteer of a recreational team or a well-paid professional. Not only are there external pressures at every stage of coaching, but within the profession, coaches exist in an open, evaluative atmosphere where they are judged regularly in an arena open to the public. The sports setting also forces competition against their peers, making cooperative communities of practice difficult to establish. To exist, and not just succeed in coaching, continual learning and critical thinking should be practiced. The welfare of sports programs, their coaches, and more importantly the overall health of the players depend on the identification and elimination of all abusive behaviors.

Yet, abusive 'koaches' continue to exhibit, often undeterred, their caustic actions, negatively affecting all aspects of the sport. The purpose of this article was to revisit the concept of abusive 'koaches,' not because their existence is rare, but just the opposite. The status of coaching has eroded to a point where the very existence of a coach who is hostile, negative, unethical, and unfair in dealing with their athletes is NOT uncommon. Too often, these behaviors are either ignored, excused, or rationalized by parents, administrators, and peers to a point where the psychological and emotional abuses are not even acknowledged, much less disciplined or corrected. The overall welfare of sports is dependent on drastic changes in the professions of coaching and those administrators who oversee them.

Epilogue

To quote the attorney for the victims of Dr. Nassar of the infamous U.S. Gymnastics tragedy, Mr. Mitchell Garabedian (MacPhillips, 2016), "If it takes a village to raise a child, it takes a village to abuse one."

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