

Defining High School Hazing: Control Through Clarity

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the extent of hazing that had existed in former high school athletes who were enrolled in introduction to coaching classes in a Northern Rocky Mountain state. A nationally accepted survey was given to 189 college students of whom the majority had participated in high school sports. Results were interpreted to determine the extent these students had been hazed in their athletic careers and specifically what those behaviors were. Implications were made for future definition and clarification of hazing to ensure proper enforcement and elimination of all negative behaviors.

In the fall of 2007, a parent anonymously accused a respected and highly successful high school coach of physically and verbally abusing his athletes. As a result of him being abruptly accused and relieved of his duties, his former and current players and the community came to his defense. It had been determined that his 'physical and verbal abuse' was a team rule that his players would not consume soft drinks and not wear hats in class during the season. It was also determined that the 'anonymous' complaint had been filed by a parent whose son was not getting playing time.

The need to belong is a strong human trait that motivates individuals in many ways. Major names in psychology such as Freud (1930) and Maslow (1968) have presented their views on that essential human characteristic (as cited in Baumeister and Leary, 1995). In those early works the desire to belong was second only to drives like safety, hunger and reproduction. According to

Baumeister, Brewer, Tice and Twenge (2007) human behavior is often heavily influenced by the need for membership in a social or cultural group and the threat of exclusion can manifest itself in strong behavioral reactions. These behavioral reactions are frequently discernable in groups of all ages that will either perpetuate or participate in initiation rites that are prerequisites to group membership. Keating, et al. (2005) stated that threatening practices such as hazing sustain and preserve groups by reinforcing collective skills and attitudes, supporting a group hierarchy, and developing a social dependency among members. In some cases these authors found that the more severe the ritual the greater the association between the victim and the group. It did not matter if the hazing were physical, mental, or emotional abuse.

In sport the definition of *hazing* can reflect many behaviors. Those behaviors vary from positive actions like requiring new athletes to attend meetings or special study halls to dangerous, often life-threatening actions such as branding or consuming large quantities of alcohol in bingeing rituals. That variability is reflected in the evolution of definitions from Olmerts (1993) in which hazing was vaguely defined as *a formal introduction of beginners into some position in which knowledge has been bestowed* through Hoover's (1999) where the activity was defined as *any requirement that humiliates, degrades, abuses or endangers individuals regardless of their willingness to participate*. As legal bodies became involved, the definitions of hazing grew both in detail and difficulty of interpretation and enforcement. Those definitions increased specificity of negative behaviors, but also included additional vague terms that can easily

create problems of identification and compliance. One state legislature (253 N.Y. S 2nd 9, 1964) included wearing clothing such as 'beanie caps' with behaviors that result in permanent disfigurement, while the Texas legislature (Reagins-Lilly, 2007) used the qualification of any behaviors that were of 'unreasonable' risk or harm or that would adversely affect a person's mental or physical health.

More recently, other organizations have taken steps to clarify the exact meaning of hazing. Authors on the very popular website, Character Counts, define hazing as:

Any activity expected of someone joining a group that humiliates, degrades, abuses or endangers, regardless of the person's willingness to participate. This does not include activities such as rookies carrying the balls, team parties with community games, or going out with your teammates, unless an atmosphere of humiliation, degradation, abuse or danger arises ([http:// charactercounts.com](http://charactercounts.com)).

Others such as the Mothers Against School Hazing (MASH) organization, (2005) defined hazing as:

...a broad term encompassing any action or activity which does not contribute to the positive development of a person; which inflicts or intends to cause physical or mental harm or anxieties; which may demean, degrade, or disgrace any person regardless of location, intent or consent of participants. Hazing can also be defined as any action or situation, which intentionally or *unintentionally* endangers a student for admission into or affiliation with any student organization (<http://www.mashinc.org>).

One can see by contrasting those that the definition in Character Counts is much more specific than that by MASH. The MASH definition would allow extensive subjective interpretation as to what behavior does and does not 'positively contributes to the development of

a human being, as well as includes any act that is unintentional. In that subjectivity lays a danger of overuse and possible abuse as dangerous as the act itself. Even a more contemporary definition by anti-hazing author and researcher, Hank Nuwer, "an all-encompassing term that covers silly, potentially risky, or degrading tasks required for acceptance by a group of full-fledged members" (p. xiv) allows for the inclusion of 'silly tasks' with those labeled as 'risky or dangerous'.

In the extensive work on hazing completed at Alfred University, over 1500 high school students responded to a national survey, and the lack of clarity and agreement on what constitutes hazing was reflected. In their results the researchers found that although only 14 percent of the subjects said they were hazed, 48 percent said they participated in activities that were defined as hazing, and 29 percent said they did things that were potentially illegal in order to join a group (http://www.alfred.edu/hs%5Fhazing/executive_summary.html).

Behaviors that put people at risk are intolerable and should be eliminated from sport. The tragedies that continue to occur are unacceptable. However, to combat the negative aspects of this practice, every effort should be taken to clarify the specific behaviors that are considered intolerable. There are many behaviors listed in even the most specific definitions of hazing that are not only harmless, but are a historical foundation of building team cohesion and camaraderie. The purpose of this study was to initiate that objectification of hazing in hopes that specific guidelines could be created to assist in the elimination of all negative actions.

Method

Over the period of two years, 189 students in introduction to coaching classes completed a survey in which they determined in what 'hazing' behaviors they were forced to participate during high school. Participation by the 96 females and 93 males was both voluntary and anonymous.

Measures

The survey was developed by the nonprofit organization, Josephson Institute of Ethics (<http://www.josephsoninstitute.org/>), whose mission is “to improve the ethical quality of society by changing personal and organizational decision making and behavior” (<http://charactercounts.org>). The close-ended questions/phrases were divided into three categories according to the intensity of potential hazing incidents. While no statistical data were reported on this instrument, the face validity of the statements is evident.

The first grouping of eight questions (see Table 1) related to positive team activities such as ‘*completing a ropes course or team trip*’, ‘*attending a skit night or team roast*’, or ‘*attending pre-season training*’. The second grouping included questions that were more negative hazing behaviors, such as, ‘*being yelled, cursed, or sworn at*’, ‘*being forced to wear embarrassing clothing*’, or ‘*acting as personal servant to players off the field, court*’. The third grouping was the most extreme in severity such as ‘*destroying or stealing property*’, ‘*engaging in or simulating sexual acts*’, or ‘*being paddled, whipped, beaten, kicked; beating others*’.

A final open-response question allowed students to furnish any additional statements desired. Earlier, demographic data had been gathered that allowed the determination, among other information, of how many (the vast majority) students had participated in high school sports.

Results

Descriptive statistics were used to illustrate the extent and types of hazing reported by these students (Table 1). The highest level of participation by students occurred in the first set of behaviors. For example, 89% of the female subjects and 91% of male subjects were required to maintain a specific grade point average to participate in their sport. Similarly, 89% of female subjects and 91% of male subjects reported being required to dress up for team functions. In contrast, there was diminished participation in the second groupings of behaviors. For example, male

subjects (68%) and their female counterparts (42%) admitted to being subjected to yelling, cursing, or swearing by others, and 20% of the females and 16% of the males were forced to do calisthenics that were unrelated to their sports.

The third, more negative, behaviors were even fewer in occurrence. Only 12% of male subjects reported “being tied up, taped, or confined in small spaces” and 18% “*being paddled, whipped, beaten, kicked; or beating others*”. Similarly, females reported being involved in ‘*destroying or stealing property*’ only 2% of the time. There was no reported involvement by female students in the other behavioral categories in the third grouping.

Discussion

In the concluding sections of the extensive report on hazing completed at Alfred University (<http://www.alfred.edu/hs%5Fhazing/recommendations.html>), the authors included in their recommendations that every effort be made to discuss in detail among diverse groups what hazing is and is not. In addition, there was an expectation that each high school group continue to provide initiation rites that are meaningful and challenging. In a similar observation, Nuwer (2007) wrote that often too much emotion and too little serious debate has occurred in the legislation concerning hazing. He wrote:

I’d urge lawmakers to be very much in agreement on a definition of hazing before passing this or any other bill that calls for punishment of hazers. Evidence presented by Alfred University researchers Norm Pollard and Nadine Hoover demonstrates that student athletes usually are unclear when hazing has occurred. The Initiation Rites and Athletics national survey found that 80 percent of all athletes acknowledged going through hazing behaviors, while only 12 percent believed they had experienced hazing (<http://www.stophazing.org/nuwer/federal-bill.htm>.)

TABLE 1: Percent of participants involved in ‘hazing’ behaviors

BEHAVIORS:	TOTAL (n=189)	FEMALE (n=96)	MALE (n=93)
GROUPING 1:	%	%	%
Attending pre-season training	69	71	67
Testing for skill, endurance, or performance in a sport	74	72	75
Keeping a specific grade point average	90	89	91
Dressing up for team functions (besides uniforms)	90	89	92
Attending a skit night or team roast	47	36	57
Doing volunteer community service	38	32	43
Taking an oath or signing a contract of standards	73	70	75
Completing a ropes course or team trip	29	29	28
GROUPING 2:			
Being yelled, cursed, or sworn at	54	42	68
Tattooing, piercing, head shaving, or branding	6	1	12
Being forced to wear embarrassing clothing	9	13	5
Participating in calisthenics not related to a sport	18	20	16
Associating with specific people, not others	11	9	13
Being forced to deprive oneself of food, sleep, or hygiene	5	1	9
Acting as personal servant to players off the field, court	8	7	1
Consuming extremely spicy/disgusting concoctions	5	1	1
GROUPING 3:			
Making prank calls or harassing others	2	0	4
Destroying or stealing property	2	2	2
Engaging in or simulating sexual acts	1	0	1
Being tied up, taped, or confined in small spaces	6	0	12
Being paddled, whipped, beaten, kicked; beating others	9	0	18
Being kidnapped or transported and abandoned	3	0	5

No one can argue in favor of hazing that results in any negative results. However, responsible adults who are charged with the elimination of hazing must know exactly what they are looking for. There are behaviors that have been mislabeled as hazing and the results of that error can be almost as damaging as the negative acts themselves. In this study, students reported anonymously the behaviors in which they were involved as athletes that could be construed as ‘hazing’ by some. The vast majority of involvement, however, was in behaviors that would be considered either positive, ‘community service, maintaining grades, completing team activities, etc.’ or neutral at worse. In the second grouping of behaviors, the only behavior that athletes consistently reported was ‘being yelled,

cursed, or sworn at’. While that action is unacceptable as written, one must exert care in the interpretation of the results. Swearing at or cursing athletes is an unacceptable behavior in any circumstance. However, the interpretation by young athletes as to what constitutes ‘being yelled at’ is very subjective. It is not uncommon to have young athletes misinterpret some enthusiastic, but acceptable coaching behaviors as ‘being yell at’. Likewise, the second most frequently reported behavior ‘participation in calisthenics not related to a sport’, is also very subjective. A common coaching error is the failure to thoroughly explain the reason for doing a certain exercise or activity. However, the magnitude of that error should not be defined as ‘hazing’.

The interpretation of results of this study is in no way intended to downplay the seriousness of hazing behaviors that are intended to mentally or physically harm athletes. The intent, however, is to direct those responsible for identifying and eliminating 'hazing' that the first step in elimination is to define the term in concrete, observable terms. By specifically defining 'hazing', those adults will also ensure that harmless and often positive actions that are used to build team cohesiveness and ensure quality performances of athletes on and off the field will continue.

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