

Beyond Victory: Protecting Young Athletes from Sexual Abuse

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Over 30 years, over 150 child victims. The victims are star athletes competing at the highest levels, vying with each other to bring glory to their nation. The ongoing trial of Larry Nassar, the sports physician who molested children entrusted to his care, highlights potentially abusive situations in the sporting world. Parents are grappling with how to keep their children safe in intense training environments where abuse can go unchecked for so long. In the interest of victory, athletes are expected to be strong and to overcome all odds. Speaking up about inappropriate sexual experiences in the setting of training can bring an athletic career to an end.

In *The International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, Celia Brackenridge reports several conditions that put the athlete at a higher risk for sexual abuse. The amount of physical handling required for coaching, dress requirements, a high degree of respect for the coach on the part of athlete and parents, and multiple opportunities for the athlete to be alone with coaching staff or away from home are all risk factors. Governing bodies such as the school/university administration can be more invested in maintaining a winning record than dealing publicly with uncomfortable truths. This adds to the secrecy and shame for athletes who are sexually abused and compromises the safety of children, leading to horrific consequences.

The victim impact statements reveal how long-lasting the effect can be, even with one such experience. Children place their trust in the adults around them and expect to be protected. When children report abuse but are not believed, they lose faith not only in the system, but in themselves. The lost potential among these women is immeasurable.

When sexual abuse is revealed, parents often blame themselves for not being able to protect their children and search for answers and accountability. To be proactive about the identification of predatory behaviors, parents must speak openly with their children about the issue of sexual harassment and sexual abuse. The odds of their children becoming victims are greatly reduced by education about appropriate touch, open communication, close proximity of the parent during practice, and education about the right of the athlete to ask questions. It is a standard practice in medicine that a third person of the same sex as the patient (or guardian) be present during physical examinations. Coaching staff and parents must transparently educate athletes about what to expect during training, physical examinations and physical therapy. If athletes become unmotivated or avoidant of attending training camp or practice, parents should open up a dialogue about the reasons why, remaining open to the possibility of abuse. Parents of team members can form parent support groups, in person or on social media, where any concerns or reports of inappropriate behavior can be discussed.

Given the intense pressure in competitive sports, parents often struggle to find the balance between encouraging their child to perform beyond their limits and their child's physical and mental health. However, a child athlete's integrity should never be compromised. It is time to claim victory over sexual abuse.