

Not in My Backyard

Sexual Harassment and Abuse in Sport

by Sandra Kirby

Dans cet article, l'auteure aborde entre autres les questions de relations privilégiées entre athlète et entraîneur et les relations de pouvoir propres aux

situations de harcèlement. Elle explique l'impact négatif du harcèlement sexuel sur l'excellence sportive.

Vulnerability to harassment stems from women's subordinate position in sport.

Many of us are aware or are becoming increasingly aware of the fright-

ening statistics of sexual harassment, sexual abuse, and child sexual assault in society and, more recently, in sport. The groundbreaking work of Celia Breckenridge of the Cheltenham and Gloucester College of Higher Education is at the forefront of research on these issues. In Canada, Helen Lenskyj at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (Lenskyj) has been gathering accounts of harassment and abuse over the past two years. Hilary Findlay and Rachel Corbett in Edmonton have been looking at the legal implications of sexual harassment within the sport context. Journalists such as Mary Hines and Robin Brown (CBC Radio), Mary Jollimore (*Globe and Mail*), John Brown (*St. John's Telegraph*), Wendy Long (*Vancouver Province*) and Lori Ewing (*Calgary Herald*) have contributed much to raising public awareness of the issue.

However, it was three television programs in 1993¹ which I believe really captured the Canadian public's attention: an April episode of "The Shirley Show," a talk show which featured retired high performance athletes in disguise, the July 8th "CBC Primetime" on sexual harassment, and the November 2, 1993 edition of "The Fifth Estate," an internationally respected investigative journalism

program. The cumulative effect of these programs was to inform viewers about sexual harassment and abuse as serious problems in society and, more specifically, in sport.

Although sexual harassment/abuse is often seen as an issue for girls and women, it also concerns boys and men. The harasser is most often male, the victim most often female. However, there may be harassment by a member of the same sex, or a female harassing a male. The harassment can happen on the playing fields, tracks, rinks, pools or waterways. It can happen in changerooms, on busses, in cars, in hotel rooms, and in elevators. It can occur on team trips or training courses; at conferences or team parties. It can happen to any member of the public using sport facilities or any member of a sport organization before, during, or after the regular sport participation. It can happen once. It can happen repeatedly over a short or long period of time. Most often, it happens in private. Not only does sexual harassment/abuse diminish the quality of sport performance but it negatively affects the quality of the experience for all concerned; the athletes, coaches, administrators, and officials alike.

Experiences of harassment by girls and women in sport

Sporting environments are not gender neutral environments. Women, men, girls and boys experience sport differently because of their gender (and age, class, race, [dis]ability, etc.). Sexual harassment did not start when women began to compete in sport. Males have always harassed each other (eg. the initiation of a rookie). It may be that with more women in sport, the sexual nature of harassment has become more prominent.

There is no doubt that sexual harassment is a serious and possibly per-

vasive problem in sport. Sexual harassment is not flirtation "gone wrong." It is unwanted attention of a sexual and/or gendered nature, distasteful jokes, threats, touching, and even sexual intercourse with athletes who may also be minors, and so on. These activities are against the law.

In sport, vulnerability to harassment stems from women's subordinate position in sport, compounded by dependence, often on the coach, and isolation (by disability, rural location, sexual orientation, race, economic situation, and age). One former athlete indicated she was sexually harassed by a male athlete on the same national team over a ten year period. Her vulnerability as a woman was compounded by her additional vulnerability as an athlete with a disability (Anonymous 1993c). Another former athlete told me she was taunted because of her colour and ethnic origin at the same time as being sexually harassed (Anonymous 1993b).

Harassment by the coaches of female athletes has received the majority of the media attention in the past year (*The Shirley Show*, *The Fifth Estate*). At the 1993 trial of Edmonton track coach George Smith, 50 years old, former athletes individually testified that he had kissed them, had them place their hands on his penis and in one case, massage his penis, had them do a sexy strip tease in front of him before a "fat test,"² touched their breasts, assaulted them, had three-some sex.

Athletes explained how they felt: one, who was 12 years old when the abuse began felt "dirty, confused, and lost" (*Edmonton Journal* 1993b). She reported that the coach proposed to her, had her in his apartment several times during the school year, and had her place her hand on his penis several times. Another, who was 14 when the abuse began, felt confused and scared. "He said he really loved me

and cared for me, he thought I'd be an exceptional athlete and that it was important for me to be close to him, to trust him" (*Edmonton Journal* 1993a). A third reported that because others were involved, as a 14-year-old, that "normalized it."

George said we, as female athletes would be able to help each other more. We had sex with each other and it was a very

"He thought I'd be an exceptional athlete and that it was important for me to be close to him, to trust him."

bonding experience, very trying emotionally. (*Edmonton Journal* 1993a)

The harassment victim may be afraid that no one will take her/his side, that she/he will be ostracized, experience threats and surveillance by others, and may even be pressured to withdraw the complaints or to withdraw herself from the team. The victim may lose interest in sport performance because of a preoccupation with the harassment. That is, the harassment can interfere directly with sport performance. The victim may feel humiliated, powerless, frustrated, even guilty. The accumulation of stress can produce nervousness, ulcers, insomnia, digestive problems, headaches, heartburn, allergies, dehydration, weight loss, and may lead to depression and thoughts of suicide, none of which is conducive to optimal athletic performance. The long term effects of harassment can be debilitating. One athlete suffered from low self esteem for years, had difficulty establishing relationships with men and is only now beginning to understand that she is not to blame (Anonymous 1993e). Another

...finds sexual intimacy difficult, has a strained relationship with her father, and has been in therapy for two years. Her trust in authority figures is ruined, her running career over. (*Edmonton Journal* 1993b)

Victims may be presented with a grim dilemma in sport: that they continue to compete accompanied by the prospect of endless harassment reducing their enjoyment and ultimately, their productivity in sport or leave the sport situation, and possibly sport, without reaching their personal achievement goals. The understanding of this dilemma is gradually filtering into sport as sport organizations seek solutions to sexual harassment.

It often takes a long time for athletes to speak out. In one case an athlete chose to speak out in 1993 about harassment and abuse which occurred from 1972-1976 (Anonymous 1993d). Another athlete decided to tell of her experience only when she heard that the coach was now involved in coaching young female athletes and that the same patterns that marked her relationship with him were showing up in the young athletes (Anonymous 1993a). She wanted the young athletes to realize that they did not have to rely on him and his methods for their athletic success. When athletes do complain, it is most often not to punish the offender, but to ensure that other athletes will not be hurt, or to make the harassment stop (*The Fifth Estate*).

The harassers

Who are the harassers? The profiles emerging from the case files of the Manitoba Human Rights Commission paint the following picture. There are the harassers who are "loud mouthed jerks," "charismatic figures," and "closed door harassers" (St. Loe).

The "loud mouthed jerks" tend to harass in public with no real idea that their behaviour causes offense. They generally do not realize the consequences of their behaviour for the victims. In sport, this would be the individual who thinks that sexual harassment is no more than flirtation gone bad, and that the behaviour is just idle fun. The "loud mouthed jerk" is often seen as an objectionable person by others and often has little support for the harassing behaviour.

The "charismatic figures" are those who surround themselves with trusting followers who seek to please the leader. This mini-oligarchy is characterized by the followers of the charismatic leader acquiescing to that person's leadership. There is a lot of self-glorification for the harasser in this situation. The harassment is usually based on over-familiarity: the hand that stays too long, the smile that becomes too intimate, intimate comments and questions. In sport, we see coaches who hug 'their' athletes (a bit too tight, a bit too long, too intimate). An example of a charismatic harasser may be the Edmonton track coach who convinced athletes that a particular sexual activity (the strip tease, sexual activity with the coach, or with other girls on the team) will improve their performances because they would then be dependent only on the coach for fulfillment and not be distracted by outsiders. Because other athletes were involved in the same activities, in a sense, being a victim of harassment is a yardstick of an athletes' belongingness in the group.

The "closed door harassers" are those who know the consequences of their behaviour and of the need for secrecy. Closed-door harassers are cautious, clever arrangers of circumstances to enable harassment to occur in situations that are not likely to be

The victim may lose interest in sport performance because of a preoccupation with the harassment.

suspect nor open to scrutiny by others. One athlete reported that her coach told her he "had to be careful about what he was doing or he might be charged" (*Edmonton Journal* 1993a).

Harassment is an expression of power, particularly power over others. It is also habitual, that is harassers may not harass more than one person

at a time, but they will likely harass that individual repeatedly, or harass different individuals one after the other. Often, the harasser needs allies, or accomplices, others to "go along with the joke" or to "egg him on." In the sporting context, harassment may be intensified by the "pack mentality," the mirror image of the team loyalty, bonding, and team play coaches strive to achieve. Braid suggests that this pack mentality will no

Sport organizations need to take a stand against sexual harassment like they have against drug use.

longer work when "there are enough women and gentle men, gay and lesbian people" (St. Loe, 16) in sport to break it.

At the ages of 8, 9, 10 and 11, coaches who abuse this relationship are like sharks in a fishpond; all those little fish with no protection in the world....coaches can take young vulnerable girls (and boys) and turn them into dependent adult athletes. There's nothing in the system to say that kind of relationship is wrong. There's no policing and a long list of pressures to keep the athlete from speaking out, everything from being afraid to upset the coach to being afraid of losing your place on the team. It's a relationship of unequal partners. It is so private and personal that this relationship can never really be understood by people outside of sport....There are athletes who would walk through brick walls for their coaches. They have such trust... So, it's a kind of absolute and it can cross the line to where it's not healthy. Walking through a brick wall is not a healthy thing. (Kirby 1993c)

The huge majority of coaches are positive influences on the lives of athletes. In sport, intimacy, deep trust, and loyalty are highly valued parts of the coach-athlete relationship. This relationship can't be neatly paralleled

to those of a boss/employee, mentor/mentoree, colleagues, or friends. It is qualitatively different, one whose desirable characteristics also guarantee that the coach and athlete will be vulnerable. Where there is a "power-over" relationship, it is the athlete who is the more vulnerable and abuse could occur.

What needs to be done?

First, a variety of investigation patterns is needed to determine whether or not harassment has occurred. The harasser profiles discussed here have limited application to sport, but they are starting points for further research. An officer of the Manitoba Human Rights Commission says that most often, harassers are habitual and serial, selecting one victim after another and that for most harassers, one victim at a time is enough (St. Loe). In the sporting context, this has consequences for our approach to eradicating sexual harassment. For example, if 'proof' of harassment is sought, asking eleven other volleyball players on the team about harassment will result in negative corroboration. The solution might be to change the horizontal inquiry into a vertical one. Earlier situations with other athletes can become proof for later complaints. Credulence is further added to the complaint if earlier victims come forward and this would be seen as compelling evidence if the earlier victims are totally unrelated to each other.

However, the examples of the harassment patterns of George Smith, the Edmonton track coach, and of harassment patterns experienced by the rowers, swimmers, and volleyball players on *The Fifth Estate* program aired November 2, 1993 show that the "charismatic figure" harasser may be quite common in sport. In all these situations, at least two athletes on the same team complained of being harassed by the coach. Clearly, both horizontal and vertical investigation patterns are needed.

Second, sport organizations need to "get it," to take the occurrence of harassment seriously, to organize re-

sponses and develop recommended strategies for bringing about change to their sports. Sport organizations do not all need to begin at the beginning. Some are already proactive in addressing the sexual harassment issues. For example, the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport (CAAWS), the Canadian Sport Council (CSC), the Coaching Association of Canada (CAC), the Canadian Professional Coaches Association (CPCA) and Sport Canada's Women's Program have worked in concert since 1993 to produce a number of documents, educational materials, harassment policies, and a strategy to eradicate sexual harassment (Corbett & Findlay 1993; Kirby 1993a, b, d). These "best practices" can be shared with many different organizations.

Some recommendations for/from the National Sport Community which emerged after a consultation with some 24 individuals of national sport organizations³ include:

- That a policy process consistent with the vision and values adopted by the sport community be identified and that a national policy be developed to address the issue of harassment in sport.

- That a Steering Committee on Harassment Issues be created to a) develop a policy process that best takes into consideration the new shared leadership in harassment development; b) develop policy; c) develop a position paper for presentation to the Canadian Sport Council Annual Assembly on directions for eradicating harassment from sport.

- That an Ombudsperson be incorporated into the functions of the Sport Council of Canada, for the specific purposes of advocating on behalf of individuals.

- That an Harassment Hotline be established, a 1-800 number, to assist individuals to talk informally or seek assistance and support for formal complaint procedures and that a media campaign be undertaken to advertise this service.

- That workshops be held with National Sport Organizations to raise

their awareness and inform them of the issues of harassment. Particular emphasis will be on policies and procedures.

These are organizationally sound strategies which will raise organizations' abilities to address the issue, reduce the isolation of victim's of harassment, and increase the education about the issue throughout sport.

Thirdly, concentration on preventative measures such as changing the environment in which harassment occurs and educating athletes, coaches, parents, and sport administrators is indicated if sport is to reduce the likeli-

Excellence in sporting achievement is not possible within an environment marked by sexual harassment.

hood that harassment will occur. The cost of harassment to victims has already been addressed. The cost to sport is also enormous. Some have suggested that a "poisoned atmosphere" is created when athletes are harassed. Absenteeism, lack of trust, athlete turnover, lost productivity, and lower team moral and energy characterize such an atmosphere. Athletes are not in a position to refuse to work in a poisoned atmosphere if the training situation is the only one available (ie. if it is the national team training camp and the coach is the team selector as well as the harasser). Sport must move to protect athletes from those who harm them by making the training environment one that is open to outside scrutiny. Excellence in sport cannot be achieved in a poisoned atmosphere.

Strategies to bring about change need to be focused on the needs of individuals, individuals who are the harassers, individuals who are harassed, and individuals in organizations who can bring about systematic change. Without attitudinal change, sport will be considerably less effective in bringing an end to sexual harassment.

This might include some reality training—as Wharton writes "If you don't get it, you can't stop it." At this

time, there is little or no discussion about sexual harassment or about the victims of sexual harassment at the upper levels of sport management. The feelings and emotions can be messy and somewhat painful to hear. What is present is organization talk—policies and procedures, strategies and plans. I suggest that, among administrators, there is a general lack of comprehension about these issues and a lack of empathy on the part of some administrators for victims of discrimination. Amongst sport management, there is still some denial that harassment occurs, suggestion that women are responsible for harassment, disbelief of the existence of a poisoned atmosphere. Feminism is in the closet in sport, and sexual harassment means speaking about feminism (Wharton 1993: 107); it means speaking about sex!⁴ A safety audit needs to be done by sport organizations, and equality training on sex, gender, and other basis of discrimination should be initiated to help change the poisoned atmosphere.

I would also like to suggest that sport organizations need to take a stand against sexual harassment like they have against drug use. This might mean, in order, that an organization "get it," an awareness of the issues, commitment to change, understanding the reality of the experience, dealing with the issue seriously, increasing their effectiveness with complaints and educational programs, reviewing policies regularly, establishing open communication patterns amongst members, and defining the expected standards of behaviour. An increase in sexual harassment complaints will result not because there is more harassment but because more victims will be able to come forward in the belief that they will be treated fairly.

Fourth, research is needed. There exists a wealth of information about workplace harassment, but research which describes and documents this behaviour as it occurs among high performance athletes, school athletes, community athletes, and as it has occurred in the careers of now-retired athletes, is desperately needed. Fur-

ther, a methodological and informational foundation in the area is needed to address these issues among the wider population of athletes and other participants in our sport, recreation, and leisure programs. From these sport-specific issues and effective strategies can be developed for eradication of sexual harassment and abuse.

Fifth, ways need to be created to support the victims from harassment and from the silent complicity of teammates and coaches. Sport is responsible for helping victims to attain just treatment.

Finally, innovative informal mechanisms in education, prevention and mediation of complaints of sexual harassment are needed. This includes help for harassers to comprehend the gravity of their actions and assistance, for those who complain about harassment.

Sexual harassment/abuse in sport is an issue of safety, quality, equality and excellence. Our sport system must strive to be a safe place for its participants and sport should be a quality experience for all. If a participant is experiencing harassment of any form, the sport experience will be less than it has the potential to be. Sexual harassment/abuse can destroy not only the quality of the participant's experience, but also mark that person's life long after sport participation has ended. Furthermore, excellence in sporting achievement is not possible within an environment marked by sexual harassment/abuse.

Sexual harassment is the problem that 'hits sport in its guts.' Sexual harassment is in sports' back yard. Harassment-free sport is good for society and good for its participants. The challenge is to act proactively to make sport harassment-free for all its participants.

Excerpted from a paper presented at the Commonwealth Games Conference, Victoria, British Columbia, August 1994.

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¹The BBC produced "Secrets of the Coach" in August 1993 which featured, amongst others, two Canadian athletes. These same athletes appeared on the Canadian "Fifth Estate: Crossing the Line" three months later. As one of them explained, it took telling her story to the British media, to realize that she was finally ready first to tell her parents and then to talk with Canadian media about her sexual abuse experience while a member of the Canadian national team.

²Smith said that the hip rotations would burn off fat. He also participated to reduce fat on his upper thighs. (*Edmonton Journal* 1993a).

³These were presented by me to this nationally organized committee on December 2, 1993, exactly one month after the airing of *The Fifth Estate* program "Crossing the Line." Included in the national group are the Canadian Sport Council, CAAWS, Sport Canada, the Canadian Professional Coaches Association, the Canadian Interuniversity Athletic Union and representatives from National Sport Organizations.

⁴I credit this insight to Betty Baxter, comment made August 12, 1994.

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JOANNA M. WESTON

Naked

A woman sleeps naked
 in a teardrop,
 breasts puckered
 by cold
 as the tear falls
 past her thighs,
 spills over knees
 washing her feet
 with a sigh,
 for it had held her
 completely.
 She is revealed,
 curved in sleep
 as her skin forgets
 the passage of grief.

Joanna M. Weston lives beside a lake with her three sons, husband, and tortoiseshell cat. She has three chapbooks out, one short one, Cuernavaca Diary, and Seasons.

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