

Bullying in Sports: The Injuries We Don't See

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"BU Basketball Coach Faces Bullying Allegations" (March 2014)

"Wells Report Concludes A Pattern of Harassment in Miami," (February 2014)

"Coach on Paid Leave After Bullying Incident." (January 2014)

"Rutgers University Football Player Claims Bullying," (November 2013)

The headlines in the news around bullying in sports seem to occur on a regular basis. Whether it has to do with an accusation towards a coach, a player crossing the line with inappropriate behavior, or an out of control parent, bullying is now being discussed throughout the media. Some claim we have become overly sensitive, while others insist there is not enough emphasis on what is actually taking place. Regardless, we now have an obligation to take a closer look to see what is occurring in sports.

Bullying is a very serious issue. New Jersey passed one of the most stringent pieces of legislation in the country to ensure safer and healthier school environments. New Jersey schools have increased their trainings, installed specific protocols and identified professionals required to investigate possible bullying situations. However, there is an element within our schools where bullying is overlooked. It manifests itself in the locker room, fields and gymnasiums. The behavior is even encouraged and promoted. It comes in the disguise of sports with a win-at-all-cost attitude. Coaches sometimes support it as the strong are encouraged to overcome the weak. The bully culture that exists in sports walks the hallowed hallways of schools where individuals are targeted based on race, sexual orientation, ethnicity or other perceived characteristics. The culture in sports unknowingly creates a bully mentality that is often overlooked and condoned.

One of the most confusing components of bullying awareness is the lack of a clear and concise definition. New Jersey's Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights has a set of specific criteria that must be met for an incident to be considered bullying – including evidence of substantial disruption or interference with the rights of others, existence of an actual or perceived characteristic as the motivating factor, and evidence of actual or threatened harm, which could involve harm to a student or his/her property, something that is demeaning to a student and/or something that creates a hostile educational environment.

Unfortunately, New Jersey's statutory definition of "harassment, intimidation and bullying" is not precisely in line with other definitions commonly used by educators, parents, students and researchers. There are a number of variations that seem to muddle the conversation. For example, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently came out with its definition, which is now heavily relied upon in anti-bullying education. The CDC defines bullying as "any unwanted aggressive behavior(s) by another youth or group of youths who are not siblings or current dating partners that involves an observed or perceived power imbalance and is repeated multiple times or is highly likely to be repeated." It is important to note the differences between the CDC definition and the New Jersey statute. However, irrespective of the definition, experts agree on three things regarding bullying. It's aggressive in nature, often repetitive (although not required under

New Jersey law) and creates an imbalance of power. In fact, New Jersey's Anti-Bullying Task Force has recently released its annual report, and that report includes an extended discussion of the concept of power imbalance. The report encourages educators to use the lens of power imbalance when trying to determine what if any distinguishing characteristic may have been involved and to discern if bullying has occurred.

Significant irony exists with these three components – aggression, repetition, power imbalance. Those involved with sports understand that to be effective young athletes must be encouraged to become aggressive. Players must practice their skills repetitively and teams need to create an imbalance of power to overcome their opponent. This “competitive” mindset is first introduced at a young age then fostered through competitive travel programs. Coaches and parents surround athletes with this environment to provide them with an added edge to develop an advantage during their high school athletic career.

Of course, many of the behaviors commonly allowed on courts and fields are not acceptable in a regular classroom environment. Teachers are not allowed to scream at students in school, yet it is often encouraged on the field. Players are taught to get “inside the head” of their opponent adding a mental edge to their advantage. Yet, they do not necessarily have the ability to turn that skill set off when they are no longer between the lines of play.

It is important for us as the adults - coaches, athletic directors, administrators, educators and parents - to all look in the proverbial mirror and take a moment to reflect on our own behavior. Are we practicing what we preach? Are we modeling behavior that we want students to emulate, not only in sports, but in all aspects of their lives, or are we engaging in bullying behavior? Are there more effective, less harmful, ways to get our messages across – about hard word, discipline, accountability and team work - that do not have unintended negative consequences? Are we coaching, directing or parenting this way because that is how it was “always done”?

So what can we do in the world of athletics to make a positive difference? Here are just a few ideas:

- Ensure that all coaches are trained not only on HIB reporting procedures, but on the issues of school climate and culture, understanding harmful power imbalances, and strategies for moving student athletes to the position of “upstanders” in responding to bullying;
- Build specific time in to the schedule for coaches to talk with their players about positive behavioral expectations, understanding the harmful effects of bullying, how to responsibly intervene when bullying occurs and how to ask for help when necessary;
- Examine your school's data and identify any patterns that emerge regarding bullying and athletics, including improper hazing rituals, and work with the school safety (climate) team to develop action plans to address any patterns;
- Identify leadership opportunities for your student athletes to work with other students and send the message that we don't tolerate bullying in our school; and

- Develop clear expectations for spectator and parent behavior, and clear means for enforcement, so that we don't condone inappropriate behavior by others at athletic events that amounts to bullying of coaches and officials.

Bullying behavior has existed for decades. However, research now exists about the impact of bullying on every party involved. Sports are not immune to its existence and those involved must raise their awareness to this important issue. Not only will it afford a valuable learning opportunity, but players can also follow the lead of their coaches. When coaches take the time to understand the impact of bullying they can hold their players accountable to an entirely different level and realize the great potential that sports has always offered – to bring together people (athletes, spectators, communities) from all backgrounds and not only tolerate but celebrate our diversity, all while learning how much more we can all achieve when we work together for something bigger and more important than ourselves

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