

Homophobia & High School Sports: Institutionalized Bullying

Roger Brigham, EDGE Media Network, June 13, 2011

With public awareness and video responses to school bullying increasing almost daily, it is perhaps inevitable that scrutiny will fall more and more on the scholastic areas in which physical domination and intimidation not only occur, but are encouraged and rewarded. Scholastic sports, especially men's full-contact sports such as football, wrestling and water polo, are entering the crosshairs.

Just this week, two mothers in Tennessee **told a federal court** their seventh-grade sons were held down in the locker room by older members of their junior high school basketball team and anally assaulted with felt markers. In late May, four members of the Wisconsin state high school championship team were arrested on charges they repeatedly **sexually harassed a 15-year-old teammate** by dangling their privates in his face and putting them on his legs or buttocks. Earlier this year, a high school senior in California who was captain of the wrestling team was **expelled and charged with sexual battery** for allegedly sticking his finger inside a teammate's anus last summer – during practice while executing a move to use in matches.

In the Wisconsin and Tennessee cases, the alleged acts were not reported as isolated abuses, but frequent and ongoing. In the Wisconsin case, the police complaint said a witness saw the defendants mocking the speech of the victim, who "is hearing impaired and needs an interpreter to communicate."

'Hazing' = Bullying

Bullying or hazing? Researchers note little distinction.

According to the National Federation of High Schools' **web site**, "Hazing is similar to bullying, but hazing has a tendency to be an institutionalized form of harassment/intimidation centering on initiation rights connected to certain school clubs and activities. Hazing can be seen as an organized form of bullying. One difference between these behaviors is that bullying typically attempts to exclude a person from the bully's activities while hazing is often a condition of acceptance or initiation into a group. While bullying may begin in early elementary school, hazing generally does not occur until children are older. As with bullying, however, hazing may involve a ringleader and bystanders who do nothing to stop the activity."

"Hazing is usually some part of initiation, or making new players do something to become part of the group," Norm Pollard, dean of students at Alfred University, told EDGE. "With bullying, they have absolutely no desire for that individual to be part of the team."

Although such incidents seem to be making headlines with increasing familiarity, that does not necessarily mean they are happening more frequently.

"There's no data to show growth or change," said Pollard, who led a 1999 study on hazing among college and high school athletes. "These days we put more stuff about our lives out there. There's less filters. There is more inclination to expose more of one's life now through things like Twitter and Facebook, so there may be more opportunities to report."

The Alfred study found that the percentage of athletes who get hazed in high school (22 percent) virtually stays the same at the college level. Overall, 48 percent of high school students in the study were hazed.

No discipline is exempt from hazing – incidents have been reported with choral groups, cheerleading squads and a surprising number of church groups and honor societies – but clearly some sports have more problems with physical and sexual assaults than others.

Some Sports Too Close for Comfort?

"This particular type of hazing seems to be mostly with males, and the sports hockey, football and wrestling," Pollard said. "It's what I consider the 'hyper-masculine' sports. For males who are adolescent and insecure about themselves, they may think one way for them to feel better about themselves is to exert power over and dominating over a perceived weaker player. They may use sexual power as a weapon. It's purely about power and control.

"The sad part is that typically the hazer has had a very similar thing done to them the year before. It perpetuates and then escalates the practice."

Dave Westol, a former prosecutor who officiates high school football and lectures extensively about hazing, said male sexual hazing dates to antiquity.

"It's about subservience and dominance," Westol told EDGE. "I understand they had 'tea-bagging' in ancient times: a warrior would sit on a fallen opponent and drop his scrotum in his face. Often there's penetration of the opponent's body, usually with some item or devise. There's no sport that's immune to it."

When Alfred University conducted its study of high school hazing, it noted its documentation of sexual harassment was less than welcomed. "Even though there is anecdotal evidence that suggests that sexual acts are definitely a part of high school hazing, we were required to guarantee the providers of student names and addresses that we would not ask direct questions about sexual activity," the report noted. "We were surveying high school juniors and seniors, who are generally between the ages of 16 and 18, and therefore considered to be minors. This restriction limited our ability to determine the prevalence of sexual abuse compared to other behaviors."

Nevertheless, hazing incidents the high school students did report included being forced to have multiple sexual partners; perform oral sex; skinny dip; strip and streak; play truth or dare; put heat balm on their testicles; shave their balls and walk around with them hanging out; rape or be raped; and/or have sex with animals.

Hank Nuwer, an associate professor of journalism at Franklin College in Indiana who has written several books on hazing, said the Wisconsin incident seemed to be more bullying than hazing. "This one just seems to be not to welcome at all, but to intimidate," Nuwer told EDGE. "This is more like the hazing you have at West Point, where you're trying to get someone to leave."

Although there are no studies indicating wrestling is more prone to such attacks than sports such as football, water polo or rugby, the perceived homoerotic nature of the scantily clad athletes whose sport requires constant, intimate and often violent contact always draws shocking and titillating headlines. Names of the moves often refer to body parts (such as arm drag and double-leg takedown), so when you get moves with names like "high crotch" and "butt drag," eyebrows are raised.

And sensibilities are outraged when the moves are improperly executed in ways that humiliate the opponent.

The charges against California wrestler for his improper "butt drag" were dropped before going to trial, but four years ago a **South Dakota state champion was convicted** of seven counts of attempted rape for the same improper execution. Now wrestling officials say their sport is getting a bad rap for something it does not even teach.

"It is never acceptable to insert fingers into the opponent's anus (regardless of duration) while executing any wrestling technique," said Mike Moyer, executive director of the National Wrestling Coaches Association, to Examiner.com. "In many cases, the 'butt drag' is technically a 'hamstring drag' because the wrestler typically grabs the back of the leg (hamstring) to use it as a lever to move from a neutral position to a scoring position."

"That's not a butt drag – that's just perverted," said Dennis DeLiddo, former coach of Fresno State wrestling program, which was eliminated from the school after 2006: "To think I'd ever instruct my guys to get on the mat and practice sticking their fingers in their teammates' rear end, it's stupid and ridiculous. A butt drag isn't sticking your finger up a guy's [anus]. That'd be illegal. That'd be counterproductive. That's not the move."

Weeding out the '10 Percenters'

"You're not seeing that so much in sports like rodeo, which is dangerous enough," Nuwer said. "I think it's the kind of sports where you gang up on somebody. They're called the '10 Percenters.' Pretty much there's one out of 10 in every group who is the troublemaker."

Responsibility for reining in those 10 Percenters begins with the coaches and parents, the researchers said, both in stopping inappropriate action when they see it and clearly setting down the ground rules from day one, including respect for themselves, for each other and for opponents.

"When I work with athletes," Pollard said, "I talk about how they are representing not just their team but their school and their sport. For good or bad, they carry that extra burden of expectation. I don't think some parents and coaches realize how powerful that relationship is."

The coaches play a significant role because primarily it's their responsibility to inform the policy of the team."

In its informational brochure for coaches called "Sexual Harassment and Hazing," NFHS notes that sexually suggestive comments, questions or actions by coaches can create an anything-goes atmosphere in which athletes are more at risk to be abused. But the brochure does not make any specific mention of use of homophobic terms such as "faggot" or challenging somebody's masculinity or orientation – events which occur almost as a matter of course in many sports programs at all levels, from youth sports to the pros. There is no mention at all of harassment of LGBT individuals.

"We know from research that anti-LGBT harassment is one of the most common kinds of harassment in schools," said Pat Griffin, director of the Gay Lesbian Education Network's program "Changing the Game." "GLSEN research also tells us that it is vital for schools to adopt harassment policies that specifically name sexual orientation and gender identity in order for these policies to effectively address anti-LGBT harassment and hazing. If we want to stop anti-LGBT harassment and hazing in sports, we have to address it specifically in all athletic department policies."

Parents, students and coaches who want to learn about how to deal with hazing can visit www.stophazing.org.