

**‘Violence and abuse prevention in sport’ in K Kaufman (ed) [title tbc.]**

**5427 words**

**Edited at 12 3 07**

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The concept of violence has a long history within the academic study of sport. Abuse has been recognised by sport researchers and policy makers only with the past 10-15 years and, even then, research studies have focussed almost entirely on sexual abuse rather than addressing others forms (emotional abuse, physical abuse, neglect and bullying) (Brackenridge and Fasting 2002).

This chapter sets out a general framework for understanding the nature of abusive violations in sport and situates these within the wider policy landscape of sport. It reviews some of the main research questions facing those who wish to eradicate child abuse in sport, and sexual violations in particular, and weighs the evidence about these from research studies.

Preventative action has developed at an uneven pace around the globe but is now, at least, on the agenda of the major sport agencies and federations. The chapter gives specific examples of prevention work in the field of children’s and youth sports and suggests some gaps in both research and policy provision that might constitute an agenda for future work.

**RECOGNISING AND DEFINING THE PROBLEM**

As with most academic concepts, the notion of ‘violence’ is hotly contested within the sport science literature. It has traditionally been associated with aggression and drawn from both ethological and anthropological perspectives. Classical distinctions such as those between ‘instrumental’ and ‘hostile’ aggression, based on theories like the frustration-aggression hypothesis (Dollard *et al.* 1939) have helped coaches and referees to make sense of robust performance and to draw a distinction between behaviour deemed to be a normal part of the ‘rough and tumble’ of the game and that considered to overstep the ethical mark. The notion of ‘intentionality’ has even found its way into the practical world of match officials trying desperately to decide whether and how far to apply sanctions. Many established field sports such as Soccer, American Football, Field Lacrosse and Basketball have even been described as ‘war without the weapons’ (Goodhart and Chataway 1968) and as microcosmic, civilised forms of ancient survival rituals or combat. In this sense, then, sport is based on violence and presents us with a set of contemporary submission rituals designed precisely to prevent injury and death yet to maintain the thrill of the chase and the excitement of an uncertain outcome. Violence is therefore often cast as a necessary condition for

excitement in sport but only if it occurs within the bounds of prescriptive rules and codes of behaviour.

But this 'aggressive' interpretation of violence overlooks more recent social theories, notably Bourdieu's (Bourdieu with Passeron 1970) notion of 'symbolic violence', by which apparently 'gentle' behaviour violates personhood and in this way, exerts control. In sport, for example, it is possible for the powerful coach to perpetrate symbolic violence over the athlete by virtue of his or her power, status or charisma and thereby to intimidate, undermine or coerce. It is this symbolic power that often underlies acts of sexual abuse in sport since athletes have very little power to resist and risk losing their chances of advancement if they blow the whistle on undesirable practices by authority figures. So, whereas traditional notions of violence are often associated with conflict between opponents, abuse is more often associated with exploitation of the relatively powerless (the athlete, especially the rookie) by the relatively powerful (the coach or other authority figure). It is because of this that I regard issues of abuse and violence to be conceptually and functionally related even though they have been differentially addressed by sport policy makers (see below).

Sport stands alongside institutions like the church as a potential venue for sexual violence and exploitation because it is characterised by hierarchical authority and reward structures and submission to a set of ideologies such as long term investment in pain in return for redemption and salvation (Summers 2000). Sport also often exhibits hypermasculinity (Benedict 1998, Kirby *et al.* 2000, Brackenridge, 2001, Leahy *et al.* 2002). Sport researchers have been interested in whether sport is a distinctive location for sex offending and a number of theoretical models have been proposed to explore this issue. For example, Brackenridge, extrapolated risk factors for sex offending in sport (see Brackenridge 2001) and a predator model which reverses the Wolf Cycle of Offending (Wolf 1984); Brackenridge and Kirby (1997) posited a model of age-related risk of sexual abuse for athletes based on the 'stage of imminent achievement' (just before peak performance is reached) which suggests there is higher risk of sex abuse in early-peaking sports; Brackenridge (2001) combined an analysis of risk with Finkelhor's four stage model of motivations for sex offending in a Contingency Model that attempts to highlight situational risk factors that are often overlooked in the traditional models; and Fasting, Brackenridge and Sundgot-Borgen (2004) examined sexual harassment survey data among elite female athletes to test hypotheses about risk and dress codes in sport, gender in sport (masculine, feminine and gender-neutral sports) and sport type (individual v. team sports).

It is not yet possible to say with confidence whether sport *does* provide unique situational or relational opportunities for sex offenders, or that patterns of offending in sport differ from those outside sport, but further research into situational conduciveness for sex offending in sport would certainly be helpful. In particular, age in relation to sporting performance level seems to offer a potentially fruitful area for enquiry since there is an emerging consensus from international research studies that the most elite levels of sport present the greatest risks of sexual offending (Fasting *et al.* 2003, Leahy *et al.* 2002).

Most of the early research on violence in sport concentrated on spectator 'hooligan' behaviour (Marsh 1978, Williams, Dunning and Murphy 1984). Indeed, to a lesser degree, this has remained a theme in sport science until today. It was not until the early 1990s that the attention of sport researchers was drawn to sexual violence within the context of sport itself – in the locker room, team bus and coach's office. This shift occurred because of two decades of feminist critiques in sport, arguing against sex discrimination in pay, facilities and access to coaching (Women's Sports Foundation US from 1984 onwards, White and Brackenridge 1985) and for sexual harassment prevention in athletics (Lenskyj 1992, Women's Sports Foundation US 2002).

So, by the 1990s, child (sexual) abuse in sport had been recognised, although not widely, and cases of sexual violence and victimisation began to appear in the media in relation to both male and female athlete victims and at both amateur and professional levels. The arrest and imprisonment of ice hockey coach Graham James in Canada proved to be the tip of a sexual violence iceberg in the sport that was subsequently uncovered by investigative journalist Laura Robinson (1998) (see also Kirby *et al.* 2000). She found case after case of abuse and violence in the men's and boys' sports, perpetrated by both coaches, through familiar grooming strategies, and by peer athletes through hazing (initiation) rites. The latter site for sexual violence often involves high levels of alcohol consumption and sexual molestation of 'groupies' or even gang rapes with homoerotic overtones (Robinson 1998, Johnston and Holman 2004). Sadly, it was the abuse of boys that provided the shock and impetus for many sexual violence prevention policy interventions. The plight of many female athlete victims was deemed to arise from 'consensual' relationships and, even in some of the leading countries for child protection and violence prevention in sport, it is still difficult to argue successfully that consent is rendered void by the lower age and/or status of the athlete. Despite that fact that many athletes are below the legal age of consent in their jurisdiction, and therefore legally 'children', they are often regarded as 'adults' if they have reached elite sport level (Brackenridge and Kirby 1997).

## **MAPPING THE FIELD**

Laurence Chalip, a world leader in the field of sport management, distinguishes between 'sport as a policy tool' and 'policies *for* sport' (2006). The former conceptualisation has two strands: one uses sport as a tool of economic development through such activities as professional (i.e. commercial sport), sport tourism and sport-enhanced property values. The other uses sport to build social capital such as improved health, social integration and the socialisation of youth. Clearly, occurrences of violence and abuse in sport diminish the prospects for success in any of these social or commercial projects. But it is the second conceptualisation of sport policy that is of more interest to us here – policies *for* sport – and that has an orientation towards performance enhancement. Chalip sub-divides this category into sports development (e.g. recruitment, talent identification, facilities and programmes), gambling (e.g. lotteries, gambling on sport and fund raising for sport) and, finally, what he terms 'problem behaviours'.

It is under this final category that we can locate violence and abuse, alongside other, perhaps more familiar issues such as gender relations, crime, racism and doping. On-field violence by athletes is an expression of rule-breaking. In the early twentieth century it was treated as such with offending athletes being disciplined within their own sporting codes. Eventually, however, violent infractions on the field of play became subjected to the eyes of the law and now athletes are liable criminal prosecution wherever their conduct is deemed sufficiently serious. Other countries' sporting cultures have followed the path of the US (Young 2002, 2004) in becoming highly litigious.

Off-field sexual violations have been much harder for sport to address than instances of on-field violence, partly because they have often been spatially and temporally hidden in locker rooms and private training locations or associated with trips away (Kirby and Greaves 1996) but also because athletes have been reluctant to report or testify against their victimisers (Cense and Brackenridge 2001). Fear of de-selection drives the elite athlete almost more than anything else which plays directly into the strategies of collusion that support grooming and sexual abuse by coaches and other authority figures. Rarely do elite athletes seek help from outside the relatively closed world of sports so that, unless there are support personnel who are both sympathetic to and knowledgeable about sexual

victimisation, it usually passes unnoticed. As with victims of sexual violence outside sport, it is often years after the fact that victims have the emotional strength to come forward to report their experiences: many never do.

Sport psychology has been relatively slow to attend to issues of sexual violence and abuse in sport: the earliest papers on the subject appeared in journals like the *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* and other social scientific journals (see Brackenridge 2001 for an overview). It was not until the late 1990s and early 2000s that the psychological perspectives on the subject sport emerged and, since then, sport-related articles have appeared in mainstream sexual violence journals (for example, see Brackenridge and Fasting 2002, Leahy *et al.*, 2004). Links between the research communities of sport and sexual violence are still relatively rare although both NOTA (the National Organisation for the Treatment of Abusers) in the UK and ATSA (the Association for the Treatment of Sex Abusers) in the US have included sport-related presentations in their national conferences, in 2002 and 2003 respectively. Rare collaborations across the sport/clinical sciences divide are beginning to be seen. Trisha Leahy's doctoral work in Australia was one example (Leahy *et al.* 2001, 2005) and, in the UK, I have worked with clinical psychologists from the Psychology Support Services at Broadmoor secure mental hospital to conduct a Multidimensional Scaling analysis of over 150 catalogued cases from sport (Brackenridge *et al.* 2007).

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND FINDINGS

As outlined above, sexual violence and abuse only emerged as a problem within sport in the early 1990s (Lenskyj 1992, Holman 1995, Cense 1997, Brackenridge and Fasting 2002). Much of our knowledge about it is derived from previous research on intra-familial sexual abuse (such as Finkelhor 1984, Doyle 1994, Fergusson and Mullen 1999). Sandra Kirby, from the University of Winnipeg, pioneered sport research into sexual exploitation, conducting the first major survey on the issue with a group of 1,200 current and recently-retired Canadian Olympians (Kirby and Greaves 1996, Kirby, Greaves and Hankivsky 2000). Since then, quantitative studies have been conducted in the USA (Volkwein *et al.* 1997), Australia (Leahy *et al.* 2002), Denmark (Toftegaard Nielson 2001), Norway (Sundgot-Borgen *et al.* 2003) and the Czech Republic (Fasting and Knorre 2005): all of these studies also included qualitative phases. In addition, interview-based research has been conducted in both England (Brackenridge 1997) and the Netherlands (Cense 1997).

There is a marked variety of research approaches to the subject, both theoretical and methodological. Theoretical perspectives adopted include: feminist and pro-feminist, psychological, constructivist, sociological, medical/health and philosophical/ethical. Research methods and measures include: the use of quantitative surveys, tests and scales, qualitative interviews, documentary content analysis, biography and narrative analysis, and discourse analysis.

The main problems giving rise to research studies in sport have concerned individual cases of sexual exploitation – such as harassment, assault or rape – among athletes. Early studies focussed on describing these experiences and comparing them with sexual abuse outside sport. Emergent themes arising from these investigations are that:

- the higher the athlete's performance level, the greater the risk of sexual exploitation
- males, especially coaches, are responsible for most sexual abuse of athletes (but peer athletes are also involved in sexual harassment and 'hazing'/ degrading initiation rituals)

Variation in definitions and research designs, together with the scarcity of studies, means that no meta analyses have yet been possible.

## POLICY INTERVENTIONS TO PREVENT SEX OFFENDING IN SPORT

Coach/athlete relationships were the focus for several early research studies but policy interventions have, arguably, been driven as much by sport organisations' and coaches' concerns about false allegations or entrapment as they have by athletes' concerns about personal safety and survival. Probably the most effective measures for preventing sex offending are awareness raising and education of *all* those with a role in sport. This is best achieved by stressing the wide variety of sex offenders and sex offending patterns and the relatively small numbers of dangerous sex offenders or offenders who are not amenable to treatment and behaviour management programmes.

Many anti-violence and harassment prevention policies in sport are based on child protection foundations (such as those developed in England). Other countries have developed separate policy frameworks for child protection and adult protection. In Australia, for example, the phrase 'member protection' has been adopted to indicate that the policies are there to protect *all* parties in the sporting encounter (Australian Sports Commission 2002 [www.ausport.gov.au/ethics/memprot.asp](http://www.ausport.gov.au/ethics/memprot.asp)). This approach is often easier to 'sell' to sport leaders and coaches since they can see their own interests represented. There is actually very little evidence of false allegations in sport (Brackenridge *et al.* 2005) but concern about this issue is so intense that protection for coaches/authority figures must feature as a dimension in any successful policy intervention. In addition, sports leaders have a responsibility to recognise and refer any young athlete who displays signs or indicators of sexual victimisation or other forms of abuse. There are, therefore, three major dimensions of protection to implement. They are:

1. protecting the athlete from abuse by the coach/authority figure
2. protecting the athlete from abuse by others (peer athletes, family etc.)
3. protecting the coach/authority figure from false allegations

Realistic assessments of personal risk can also help to allay false fears. Many public education campaigns emphasise taking sensible precautions in public spaces and at social events, especially in relation to the consumption of alcohol or recreational drugs, potential 'date rape' (Benedict 1998), and travel arrangements.

The UK has led the world in developing comprehensive policy provision for child athlete welfare and abuse prevention. The Child Protection in Sport Unit (Boocock 2002) was set up in 2001, co-funded by the government's sport agency, Sport England, and England's largest children's charity, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC). From 2003 the award to sport bodies of government funding became contingent on them satisfactorily meeting nine national CPSU standards within five years ([www.theCPSU.org.uk](http://www.theCPSU.org.uk)). All certified coaches in the UK must now complete a basic child protection awareness course that equips them to recognise and refer possible cases of child abuse, sexual or other. In addition to this, many individual sport organization in the UK also now mandate club officials or others who deliver youth sport to attend child protection training courses. The Football (soccer) Association, for example, had trained more than 150,000 people in child protection by early in 2006 (The Football Association 2006 [www.theFA.com](http://www.theFA.com)).

A public protection scheme that is designed to manage rather than block out sex offenders is *Leisurewatch*, part of the Derwent Initiative, based in Northumbria, UK, that arose from the Cleveland (UK) child sex crime scandal of the early 1980s (The Derwent Initiative 2002, [www.thederwentinitiative.co.uk](http://www.thederwentinitiative.co.uk)). The scheme is based on the premise that that public surveillance and management within leisure centres and swimming pools is a more effective safety mechanism than exclusion through criminal record checking. In this way, known offenders are monitored in these public spaces rather than being banned and then

finding surreptitious access to children. This approach to sex offender management is new and relatively controversial but is gradually finding favour with some police authorities who initially saw it as a challenge to their authority as crime prevention managers.

Other sports related programs and interventions include:

- a US web-based resource to reduce hazing in sports ([www.stophazing.org/athletic\\_hazing/index.htm](http://www.stophazing.org/athletic_hazing/index.htm) )
- the anti-harassment policy from New South Wales, Australia ([www.dsr.nsw.gov.au/industry/r\\_a-z\\_harass.asp](http://www.dsr.nsw.gov.au/industry/r_a-z_harass.asp))
- a position stand on harassment in sport from a leading international pressure group for women and girls – *WomenSport International* (2002) ([www.sportsbiz.bz/womensportinternational/taskforces/wsi\\_position\\_statement.htm](http://www.sportsbiz.bz/womensportinternational/taskforces/wsi_position_statement.htm) )
- a position stand on harassment in sport from the leading advocacy group for women and girls' sports in the USA ([www.wsf.org](http://www.wsf.org) )
- a position paper from one of the most respected national physical education agencies in the USA ([www.aahperd.org/naspe/pdf\\_files/pos\\_papers/sex-harr.pdf](http://www.aahperd.org/naspe/pdf_files/pos_papers/sex-harr.pdf) )
- a template for developing anti-harassment policies in sport developed after the 2002 World Conference on Women and Sport held in Montreal, Canada ( [www.canada2002.org/e/toolkit/organizations/harassment.htm](http://www.canada2002.org/e/toolkit/organizations/harassment.htm) )
- a position paper from one of the most respected national physical education agencies in the USA ([www.sportinsociety.org/vpd/](http://www.sportinsociety.org/vpd/) )

Despite these examples, there are several reasons why knowledge and prevention work on violence and abuse in sport is limited on a wider international scale. These include:

*Level of awareness and political support:* Some countries are in denial about the possibility of sexual violence or abuse occurring in sport; some regard it as inevitable that there will be a kind of 'casting couch' system for aspiring athletes; some refuse to sanction research or policy development on the grounds that it would bring sport into disrepute; and in other countries the subject is taboo since it endangers anyone who dares to raise it in public.

*Geography and coordination:* Language differences mean that information has not been widely shared between countries; the various international sport authorities have only recently begun to acknowledge the issue so it has not appeared on their research or policy agendas. The International Olympic Committee, for example, published its first ever statement on harassment and abuse in sport in only 2007 ( IOC, 2007), and the United Nations International Children's Fund (UNICEF) have commissioned supplementary research to fill gaps in their major global study of violence to children that omitted sport (UNICEF, 2006).

*Definitions and legislative requirements between and within countries:* Ages of consent vary widely from country to country, from as low as 12 years of age to as high as 21 (AVERT 2006 [www.avert.org/aoconsent.htm](http://www.avert.org/aoconsent.htm)), which makes it difficult to arrive at a common set of concepts of athlete welfare and protection. Sport organisations themselves adopt different age boundaries between 'juniors' and 'seniors' with some talented athletes able to perform in senior international competitions when legally defined as a child and expected to cope with responsibilities such as international travel. In other sports, 'adults' are infantilised by coaches who dictate their dress, diet and social lives.

*Resources:* Many countries have very limited resources for sport development and prefer to channel these into performance enhancement work such as coaching or talent development rather than research. There have, as yet, been no cost-value assessments of violence prevention initiatives in sport but studies *outside* sport indicate that such behaviour causes a huge drain on resources (for example, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2003).

*Links to international federations:* Not all sport delivery agencies are affiliated with international sport federations. Even those that are do not necessarily have to abide by agreed standards of child welfare or athlete protection.

*Ability to share (confidential) information between and within countries and organisations regarding offenders:* There is no agreed protocol for the sharing of information between nations about alleged or convicted offenders in sport. As a result, some convicted former coaches have been able to move between countries and keep coaching.

*Human rights orientation:* Notwithstanding the almost-universal acceptance of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, different countries adopt very different operational interpretations of children's rights in sport, leading to a wide spectrum of cultural practices and norms. In short, what is regarded as child abuse in sport for one country might be regarded as normal elite coaching in another (David 2004).

## RESEARCH AND POLICY GAPS

Sport is not immune from the social problems that beset wider society. Therefore, we should not be surprised to come across cases of sexual violence or abuse. That said, we need to maintain a realistic perspective – sport is neither a den of iniquity nor some kind of pure paradise. There is some research evidence that things may be both *better* in sport (because sport fosters athlete protection and resilience against sexual exploitation) yet also *worse* (because authority figures in sport have been found to perpetrate more sexual exploitation of athletes than bosses do of workers or teachers do of pupils). Without further research, however, it is too early to say with certainty whether sport is more or less likely to harbour abuses than other sectors.

Most of the scientific research on child abuse in sport has concentrated on behaviour rather than policy (Brackenridge and Fasting 2002, Cense 1997). Logically, investigations into the nature and prevalence of abuses to athletes have preceded studies of policy impacts (Brackenridge *et al.* 2005). What policy research has been published is of variable quality and scope. It is important, wherever possible, for research to underpin the development and implementation of abuse prevention policies and for work on abuse inside and outside sport to be brought together in mutually reinforcing ways. Yet, all too often sport has been ignored by international policy analysts, perhaps because it has been thought of as less serious in relation to the weighty issues of child poverty, malnutrition, HIV/AIDS and so on.

In the future, effective violence and abuse prevention work in sport must develop hand-in-hand with such work outside the domain of sport. As mentioned above, the child violence work by UNICEF ([www.unicef.org/protection](http://www.unicef.org/protection) 2006) has not yet incorporated sport, and few sport organisations currently collaborate with domestic violence units or researchers to learn from their experiences. There are many under-researched areas of sport abuse that might well form the basis for a future research and policy agenda. We know very little about:

- male victims and female perpetrators
- emotional and physical abuse and neglect
- peer abuse/bullying/hazing and homophobic bullying
- female-female abuse
- abuse of younger children at the recreational level of sport
- policy links beyond sport e.g. with social work, child welfare groups and correctional services.

In relation to prevention, future research could usefully examine:

- the efficacy of educational and initiatives, such as coaching clinics and accreditation schemes

- the relationship between sport prevention policies and perceived security in sport among athletes and parents
- the degree of political will among sport administrators to implement prevention policies
- the potential for prevention to impede or enhance sports coaching at elite levels.

Perhaps most concerning, and in stark contrast to the field of education, is that the athlete's voice is absent in almost all violence and abuse research studies and policy interventions. As we work to empower athletes to understand and take responsibility for their own destinies so we should also see a reduction in tolerance towards sexual violence in sport and, perhaps eventually, a safer and more humane field of play.

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