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Q: Are sexual harassment and inappropriate coach-athlete relationships a new problem?

A: No. Sexual harassment and inappropriate coach-athlete relationships have always been a part of the sport landscape. Unfortunately, in the past, student-athletes were afraid of reporting coaches, parents often took the side of the coach and told their children to “tough it out”. The media, afraid of reduced access to coaches they offended, ignored the issue and schools and colleges did their best to sweep these situations under the rug.

What makes today different are a series of factors:

- A more aggressive investigative media that isn’t in the “coach protection” mode.
- Parents and members of the general public are more educated about Title IX and its prohibitions against sexual harassment and abuse.
- We live in a more litigious society in which parents aren’t afraid to sue school districts or institutions of higher education when harm is done to their children/
- The new social media environment has given greater reach to bullies who can with cyber bully, cyber-stalk and cyber-harass with a simple mouse click.
- Sport organizations are beginning to transmit clearer definitions of coach-athlete ethical conduct and create coaches’ codes of ethics; mechanisms sorely needed in a field where certification to coach is still not a mandatory requirement.
- Legal protections have improved. Since 2001, clear interpretations of Title IX’s sexual harassment provisions have been disseminated. As well, the Clery Act requires national reporting of campus crimes and state child welfare laws are expanding their definition of mandatory reports. All of these legal protections have resulted in more court cases clarifying or upholding victim’s rights.
- Research is telling us that: (1) reports coming forward from victims are vastly more likely to be accurate than not, (2) 20% of all women and 6% of all men are victims of completed or attempted sexual assault in college, (3) athletes are more likely to experience abuse than non-athletes, and (4) male abuse of females is more prevalent and this is especially true in athletics where there are significantly more males than females coaching female teams.

Topics

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