

Safeguarding the Elite Young Athlete

Background

All young people have the right to participate in sport in a safe environment which promotes their welfare - regardless of whether their involvement in sport is at a recreational or elite level.

No young person starts off as an elite athlete; they must grow in experience, skill and confidence with the support of their coach and others. Many sports organisations already ensure that the majority of young people involved in their sport only participate in age appropriate levels of competition with correct safeguards in place but there remain specific concerns around the treatment of elite young sports people.

Physical and Emotional Impact on Elite Young Athletes of the:

Sporting Environment

Jon Oliver (2010) emphasises that training routines should consider the development of the whole young person to maximise their development and potential. Oliver points out that, although the importance of the physical and technical factors will vary depending on the sport, too much emphasis on the conditioning of a child may have a negative impact on their social and physiological development. Within the competitive sport model, too much early pressure on competition can lead to burn-out and withdrawal from sport among children.

A number of researchers over the years have highlighted the particular vulnerability of those young people who are participating in elite level sport, and the justifications behind the strenuous training environment these young people may have to experience without any consideration to the negative impact it may be having on the child's development.

Potentially abusive situations can arise when a high performance coach develops training programmes and attendance at competition schedules that are focused on the goals of the sport to achieve success rather than the needs of the young person. An example of this may be a training schedule that requires travelling long distances to training centres four times a week either after or before school, then having to represent the young person's county or region at competitions every weekend; or being forced to play above their age band. These demands on the talents and time of a young person can have negative consequences on their ability to socialise with those outside the sports world and denial of other peer opportunities and friendships.

A young athlete competing in too many events/competitions that are close together or being exposed to excessive training requirements can be at a physical risk because of a shortened recovery time. Another concerning issue is that on occasions young athletes are required to operate in a more adult focused environment. We must start to question whether these demands are fair on the young person or their parents and other siblings as this sort of commitment must have an impact on the whole family.

Ethos

With all the efforts that sport has put into maximising participation and quality coaching for grassroots clubs we need to consider whether young people at the elite level are being afforded the same level of consideration as other participants; or are required to accept poor or possibly exploitative practices because they have the most to lose if they complain.

Although there have been great strides made in challenging the 'no pain no gain' culture within sport, when it comes to elite sport this view point still appears to persist and the CPSU believe that this needs to be challenged as being detrimental to the welfare of young athletes. Cook and Cole (2001) explained that when the goal of winning at all costs overshadows other reasons for participating in sport, the participant is lost and the child quickly becomes an instrument of status to be trained and disciplined to fulfil a particular role. Once this shift in identity occurs, the athlete is no longer viewed as an individual with personal needs and rights, but rather as a tool to be used in the pursuit of sporting success, thus placing the athlete in a position of vulnerability to abuse.

Parents and even coaches have contacted the CPSU to express their concern about the overuse of training, or the lack of opportunity to recover from injury, that can result from a culture that has evolved within elite sport that pushes a child and often their family to the limits under the justification that "that's just what you have to do if you want to succeed in sport". Pike refers to this as a pressure to conform to a "culture of risk" in sports which compromises the wellbeing of young athletes. This requires the young person and their parents to conform to the expectations without questioning the impact it may have on them as an individual.

Stirling and Kerr (2009) in their research data revealed that it was not uncommon for athletes to be afraid of their coach. They expressed fear in two respects; one was a sense of being intimidated by the coach and the second was a fear of losing their athletic career should they report their coaches' abusive practices. Fear is reflected in the following statements: "I remember being afraid of her (my coach) right from the beginning... I was scared of her", and "Whatever the coach said, whatever they told me to do was gold, and I was afraid to not do it".

One athlete in the same research also indicated that even when parents intervened the response was not positive, "Every parent tried at one time or another to talk to her (coach) about her anger and name calling, but it never made a difference. I think she scared them too...And then after the parent talked to her the athlete would get teased or chastised by the coach".

Unhealthy Coach- Athlete Relationships

Rhind (2010) argues that due to the culture of sport, an authority system may be created which facilitates power, obedience and potentially the rationalisation of abuse which can be more prevalent at the elite level. This abuse can take the form of unhealthy or even illegal sexual contact. Elite athletes spend a significant amount of time alone with their coach who is often involved in other areas of the athlete's life as well. One athlete in Stirling and Kerr's research suggested that coaches shouldn't get so close to the athlete that they "cross the line". Specific behaviours of a coach described "as crossing the line" included social outings (movies, barbeques, time in hot tubs), hugs, kisses, texts/phone calls and highly personal conversations that were irrelevant to the athlete's participation in sport.

There have been a significant number of people convicted of child sexual abuse who were in positions of responsibility in relation to youth sport. Prosecutions for abuse included individuals from a wide range of sports.

Conclusions

Stirling and Kerr argue that the coach has immense power over the athlete, power that often transcends to other areas of an athlete's life such as academics, social life and diet. Sports governing bodies in particular need to understand this power imbalance and have robust systems in place to respond to abusive practices and enforce standards of behaviour for coaches of elite athletes as they would for other coaches.

Margo Mountjoy (2010) from the International Olympic Committee Medical Commission emphasises that elite child athletes deserve to train and compete in pleasurable and suitable environments with the need for injury and illness surveillance programmes, and the monitoring of volume and intensity of training and competition. The challenge for sports governing bodies would firstly be to establish these as basic principles for all elite athletes and then secondly consider how they could implement such recommendations and ensure they are enforced.

The following are issues that sports governing bodies may wish to consider:

- Sports codes of conduct should be reviewed to include wording referencing the sports view on a person in authority abusing their position of trust. Suggested wording may be:

“Coaches should ensure they maintain healthy, positive and professional relationships with all athletes. Coaches and others in positions of authority and trust in relation to athletes aged 16 and 17 years must not engage in sexual relationships with them while that unequal power relationship exists.”

- Governing bodies should consider the emotional, social and physical impact of the training requirements set for their elite young athletes. Particularly those programmes link to athlete funding.

At the elite level a young person’s commitment is expected and assumed, but in situations where this operates within an established “culture of risk” such commitment can be abused physically, sexually or emotionally. Adults around that young person must ensure suitable boundaries are maintained and dangerous practices removed from the sport.

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