

Myths and evidence – learning from our journey

Celia Brackenridge, Director, Centre for Youth Sport and Athlete Welfare, Brunel University, West London, UK

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Where were you in 1993?

Seventeen years ago, most of you were probably not engaged in your current roles ... but some of us still recall the tidal wave of shock that hit the world of sport in the early 1990s when Paul Hickson was arrested and charged ...

At the time of the Hickson case, David Sparkes (Chief Executive Officer of the Amateur Swimming Association) said in a radio interview "Hickson's a one-off" – in other words it doesn't (really) happen here: we call this 'denial'.

"If you don't want to believe it, you won't see it."

[Former team mate of abused ice hockey player Sheldon Kennedy (1)]

But David knew, as I and many others did, that his sport had been dealing with allegations of maltreatment for many years. Worth remembering then, that - like mice in your kitchen – there's never only one. Denial is, thankfully, rare in sport these days. But back then, we lacked an evidence base by which to judge our own knowledge or lack of it, on this subject.

We faced a Catch 22. It was difficult to get sport to provide any data on this subject, and difficult to persuade the child protection agencies that there was a problem in sport. I could not get permission to do a survey across sports, but could not persuade the government to do anything without such data.

But now, thanks to some systematic quantitative and qualitative research, and help from some brave National Governing Bodies of sport (NGBs), we have a growing body of evidence on which to base our safeguarding policies and procedures and our all-round approach to athlete welfare.

Research has helped us to understand two basic elements of the issues: first, the behaviour of abuse perpetrators and the consequences of abuse for victims (2, 3); and secondly, the extent and impact of safeguarding policies in sport (4, 5).

I'm going to take you through some of the common myths that we have encountered during our 20 year expedition through the foothills to the peaks of safeguarding. I will try to show how research findings can help to challenge these myths and provide support for you in implementing the Call to Action.

MYTH 1: "Sport is a safe space for young people"

Is sport better or worse than other sectors when it comes to child abuse?

Why are some people still surprised by child abuse in sport? We should be surprised if child abuse did not happen in sport. Sport is just one part of our social system, suffering all the good, bad and ugly features of other sectors, including child abuse.

But, there is some good news. We already know that teenage female athletes start being sexually active later than their non-athlete counterparts (6). There is now some limited evidence that sport can help to build resilience against sexual exploitation (7) and against delinquent behaviours more generally (8) – to this extent we should be happy to see that being active in sport helps tackle more than just the obesity crisis.

It also seems from some data that female athletes suffer more harassment outside than inside sport (9). Yet they experience more harassment from their coaches than pupils or workers experience from teachers or bosses. This is explained by the authoritarian hierarchies in sport – with coaches all-powerful and athletes often lacking a chance to express their own opinions or to challenge sport authority figures (10, 11).

MYTH 2: “It doesn’t happen in our sport”

Are some sports immune from the need for safeguarding?

Abuse happens in all sports (12). We think that early-specialisation sports *may* present greater risks of sexual exploitation, especially those who for whom intensive talent ID happens just before or around puberty (13). However, this hypothesis is only weakly supported by empirical data since we have access to so few well-archived and detailed cases. We do not yet know whether there is any relationship between other types of abuse and early/late specialisation sports.

MYTH 3: “Child protection is just for kids”

Is safeguarding really necessary at elite level?

It is not uncommon for top coaches to complain about the intrusion of safeguarding into their work – “it gets in the way of performance” (14). Wrong. The complete opposite has been found, in studies across several countries. Survey data from Australia (15), the Czech Republic (16), Norway (17) and Belgium (18) show that, the higher an athlete progresses up the sporting talent ladder, the greater the risks of being exploited sexually. The latest survey data show that the same applies to emotional abuse of young athletes (19, 20, 21). So, far from needing less safeguarding at top level we actually need just as much there as lower down the talent ladder.

The happy athlete is more likely to achieve than the harassed or abused one: safeguarding athlete development and pushing for achievement are not in opposition but are two sides of the same performance coin. If our elite coaches understood this – and were prepared to embrace safeguarding as an essential part of their own preparation - there would probably be far less misery, fewer drop outs and fewer long term negative consequences among elite athletes. So far, we have only a few research data on this, plus quite a lot of anecdotal/biographical evidence (22, 23, 24).

MYTH 4: “Scanty clothes lead to more abuse”

Does less clothing cover lead to more sexual exploitation?

No: a large survey in Norway found more harassment of female athletes in sports with greater clothing cover (25). This may be due to them being seen as more masculine sports and thus provoking homophobic and sexually harassing reactions. It’s also possible that scanty clothing is associated with early specialisation sports –

in other words that peaking age is the important mediator rather than clothing as such.

MYTH 5: “We can’t touch athletes any more”

Is abuse more likely in sports where there is a lot of close interpersonal touching/manual support?

As far as we know, no. There is no proven connection between handling or manual support and the likelihood of sexual exploitation (26). However, just as happens in physiotherapy or nursing, there are commonsense protocols that should be observed by any coach or trainer who has to touch an athlete. This helps to secure consent and alerts the athlete and anyone watching about what to expect and why it is being done. Further, no-one in their right mind would stop a coach or helper comforting an injured athlete - as I have heard said in some coach workshops.

MYTH 6: “Ours is a team sport so we don’t need to worry”

Are athletes in individual sports are more likely to experience abuse than those in team sports?

No. Abuses of *all* types take place in *all* sports (27, 28). No sport is immune. Individual performers are often involved in squad training; team athletes often train alone. The competitive structure of a sport tells us nothing about the type or frequency of safeguarding problems that it may encounter (29). However, we do know that abusive initiations ceremonies - termed ‘hazing’ - are often associated with team sports (30, 31).

MYTH 7: “Coaches are the main problem”

Are coaches the majority perpetrators of abuse?

No. In fact, athletes perpetrate more sexual harassment on their peers than do coaches (32, 33). Athlete-athlete bullying is also widespread but we have no systematic data on this. Hazing has been studied a lot in North America and is known to also take place in the UK, among both male and female athletes. We are only just starting to see studies of hazing in British sport but several high profile incidents have appeared in the media in the past few years, including one student death (34, 35).

MYTH 8: “All our coaches are licensed so we don’t have to worry”

Are perpetrators of sexual abuse in sport drawn mainly from those without proper qualifications?

Not necessarily. On the contrary, coach perpetrators are often very highly qualified and very highly respected which acts as a mask for their misdemeanours (36). However, it is true that we know very little about people working in the unregulated sector. Thomas Hamilton, the Dunblane murderer, for example, used informal sport sessions as a means of accessing young children (37). Hopefully we now have better vetting in place and, as coaching becomes fully professionalised, more people will experience safeguarding training and adopt best practice.

**MYTH 9: “We work in a male-only environment so we don’t need to worry”
Is abuse perpetrated only by males on females?**

No. Women also abuse (38). But since most coaches and athletes are male there is a statistical probability that most perpetrators of abuse in sport will therefore be male. Women are certainly involved in perpetrating emotional abuse and bullying: we have no studies yet of perpetrator gender and neglect in sport. We have some data showing that female athletes are starting to mimic male hazing traditions (39, 40). Both men and women, boys and girls, may be victims of any type of abuse. Furthermore, even though there *are* known cases of homosexual and lesbian perpetrators in sport, sexual orientation is not related to sexual abuse (41). Many men who perpetrate sexual abuse are married with children (42). Making assumptions about sexual orientation and abuse in sport simply fuels homophobia.

**MYTH 10: “Safeguarding is just for softies ... a bit of rough and tumble never did me any harm as a kid”
Is safeguarding an extension of the ‘nanny state’ and political correctness?
After all, one person’s abuse is another’s way of toughening up the athlete.**

Wrong. This kind of attitude reflects institutional tolerance for maltreating athletes and overlooks the longer term harm that can result from ‘tough’ training and coaching regimes. It’s very similar to ...

**MYTH 11: “Only the strong survive.” “No pain, no gain.”
Does success demand that athletes should suffer emotionally?**

No. Performance success is linked to support and nurturing as much as it is to mental toughness. There are no gains (but many losses) to be had from athlete abuse (43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48).

**MYTH 12: “We must all be on the lookout for signs of grooming in sport”
Is sexual abuse the most common safeguarding issue in sport?**

Probably not. Poor practice, emotional abuse and bullying are probably far more prevalent than sexual abuse in sport (49, 50) but our obsession with all things sexual means we have a distorted concern about this. It is likely that rates of the different forms of abuse vary from sport to sport but we do not have clear sport-specific data about this yet.

**MYTH 13: “Our advanced standards will protect us from scandal”
Do standards guarantee that children are safe in sport?**

No. We have studies showing that there is often a policy vacuum between national and local or club level, and that policy impacts fade unless safeguarding work is constantly refreshed (51, 52, 53).

**MYTH 14: “Kids have nothing useful to say about this subject”
Are children in sport able to offer sensible ideas about their own sport experiences and safeguarding issues?**

Yes. But too often we exclude athletes – of all ages – from expressing their own views and or being listened to (54, 55). Thankfully, many NGBs and IFs now have athlete forums or commissions which allow young people to have direct input into decisions about their training, competition and welfare (56, 57). This, in itself, helps us to comply with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and also helps to empower young athletes and thus to make them less vulnerable to all types of abuse. That said, we should never forget that adults should always be held responsible for their own actions.

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