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## Coaching and the Abuse of Authority

Richard C. Crepeau

University of Central Florida, [richard.crepeau@ucf.edu](mailto:richard.crepeau@ucf.edu)

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The breakdown of authority is often cited as a primary cause of the disorders and maladies of society. The loss of respect for authority is seen as a major problem among the young. Many of the symbols of authority have lost their luster and seem no longer capable of evoking deference.

Authority, most would agree, is a good thing, a necessary thing. As with all good things, however, in excess or when abused, it can turn bad. At times authority abused can be the most exploitative of forces and approach the essence of evil.

Last week out of the world of hockey came a story of the abuse of authority so disgusting and so evil that it seems, as it does in all cases like it, nearly beyond belief. Last week Sheldon Kennedy of the Boston Bruins revealed in testimony in a Calgary courtroom that his Junior League coach Graham James sexually abused him on at least 300 occasions over a six-year period between 1984 and 1990. The abuse started when Kennedy was fourteen and his coach was in his early thirties. For over six years James had authority and total power over a young boy, and he abused that relationship repeatedly. Kennedy was not James' only victim.

Last July in a study sponsored by Sport Canada, twenty per cent of the athletes responding said that they had been sexually involved with their coaches while playing on national teams. Nearly ten per cent experienced "forced sexual intercourse," and some of them were under the age of sixteen when it happened. One would guess that the situation in the United States is not significantly different.

Why does this happen? It comes back to authority and power and fear. There are many authority figures in our lives, parents, teachers, the clergy, and of course coaches. All have power over us, and we all know of cases of sexual abuse involving these authority figures. For coaches the power can be overwhelming.

The relationship between player and coach takes all sorts of forms and shapes. The coach can be a parental substitute. The coach may be admired and respected as a person. The coach may be feared, because the coach holds the key to what the athlete wants most. The coach may be loved. And the coach will use all of these levers and buttons to teach and to motivate. From the first day of practice the coach has power because the coach will

determine who will play and how much they will play. A coach can cut a player off the team, completely or partially. The coach seems to totally control the destiny of the player and therefore access to fame and fortune, to the pro-myth.

This places enormous responsibility on the coach, and with such a power balance in the relationship it opens endless opportunities for abuse. Players are completely vulnerable and literally at the mercy of coaches.

This is why in youth sport the position of coach is such a critical one. Young boys and girls are still feeling their way in life, learning what is and what is not acceptable, caught up in the quest for recognition and love, willing to do anything to please those who have the power to fill the empty spaces in their developing personalities.

Sexual abuse by coaches of athletes is too common, but it is not the only form of abuse practiced on young athletes. Physical, mental and verbal abuse are also too common. Here again coaches are no different than many others, expect that in coaching motivational techniques often depend heavily on physical, mental and verbal pressures that too easily can slip into abuse.

We all have seen it in practices and on the sidelines. Football coaches verbally abuse and physically assault their players in the name of "teaching," "motivating," and "discipline." Basketball coaches can be seen nightly on television berating their players in front of thousands of fans in the arena and hundreds of thousands at home. Hockey, swimming, track or any other number of sports are no different.

In a time when Vince Lombardi's name is invoked with great reverence, it would be good to recall that Coach Lombardi treated all his players alike. Like dogs. The infliction of physical and mental pain, the withholding of approval, were used routinely by Lombardi to motivate his players. These methods are accepted as definitions of "good coaching."

It is easy to condemn sexual abuse by coaches and it should be done loud and clear. Other forms of abuse should not be accepted either, because all of them undermine authority, defeat discipline, and create the dysfunctional human being.

If authority is to be maintained and honored in society, it must be exercised with care and caution, especially when the powerful

are dealing with the vulnerable. This is the charge to those who would be called "coach."

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