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Sexual Abuse In British Youth Football

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE - Sexual Abuse In British Youth
Football
DECEMBER 8, 2016

It has been almost three weeks now since the first stories of child abuse in British football were published in *The Guardian*. The first revelation involved one player coming forward to describe how he was abused by his youth football coach at the Crewe Alexandra football club.

The charges came from [Andy Woodward, age 43](#), who said that his youth Coach Barry Bennell had repeatedly sexually abused him during the time Bennell was coaching at Crewe and Woodward was a player there. The first abuse occurred when Woodward was eleven years old and went on for several years.

In the next few days, three more players came forward, and the four men appeared on the BBC to discuss being abused in youth football. By the end of November the number of players reporting abuse reached 20. Several more clubs and coaches were implicated. Manchester police were investigating ten suspects who had been accused by thirty-five players. Within another few days 55 clubs had been named in charges, and the number of players coming forward continued to rise. At least three clubs initiated internal investigations.

Barry Bennell, the youth coach at Crewe Alexandra and principal target in the initial charges, has been arrested and convicted of sexual abuse of young boys several times over the past three decades. He became a junior scout and then junior coach in 1970, and despite rumors and charges, Bennell remained with Crewe Alexandra until the late 1980s. From there he moved on to other

clubs and their youth teams. He was arrested in Florida in 1994 for sexually abusing one of his players while leading a team on tour. He served four years in prison. American authorities later described him as having an "almost insatiable appetite" for young boys.

In 1998 Bennell was sentenced to nine years in prison for sexually assaulting young boys, and a year ago he was again sentenced for abusing a 13-year-old boy. He now faces eight charges of sexual abuse of a 14-year-old boy between 1981 and 1985. Five of the charges are for assault on a boy under 14 years of age, two counts of inciting a boy under 14 years of age to commit an act of gross indecency, and finally assault with intent to commit buggery. For at least 25 years, Barry Bennell was put in a position by football clubs at various levels in which he had control over young boys. How could this have happened? Why did it go on for so long? Why is it only now that these charges have surfaced?

The answers to these questions are not difficult to discern. These kinds of scandals in sport are not new and are not all that rare. Perhaps the scandal that most closely parallels this one, was the case in Canada involving junior hockey that surfaced in early 1997. Between 1984 and 1990, Sheldon Kennedy was assaulted 300 times by his junior coach Graham James. This abuse occurred at approximately the same time that Bennell was abusing boys at Crewe Alexandra.

The *modus operandi* of James and Bennell were also much the same. Bennell was charming and entertaining and loved by parents of the boys. He was clever and performed tricks with the ball on

the football pitch to the delight of the boys. Bennell understood what the boys liked and furnished a play room in his house with all the latest electronic games and other gadgetry that drew them in. The boys were invited to come to the house, enjoy the play room, and in some cases were invited to spend the night. Once Bennell's desires settled on a particular boy, he moved on his victim. For the boys, there was a sense of shame and helplessness, the latter coming from the knowledge that this man controlled their football future. The coach was the gatekeeper to their football dreams. Additionally, who would believe the words of a young boy against a popular and significant figure at the football club?

Bennell was not the only predator in youth football or youth sport generally. There were rumors and whispers about others, and now many of those rumors have become charges made in the current revelations. What is clear is that when a coach was charged and there seemed some evidence or chance of proof, football clubs and authorities circled the wagons. In some cases simple denial was enough, and when it wasn't enough, financial settlement with legally binding clauses of silence were negotiated. The clubs and the parents settled. As the current revelations have rolled out, the British press has termed this "hush money." This process of settlement sometimes led to the dismissal or transfer of a coach, or a change of duties where they would have no contact with boys. Criminal proceedings were avoided. Most often those charged moved on to other venues where their pattern of behavior could continue.

The parallels to the scandal within the Catholic Church and the actions of some bishops are striking.

What I wrote about the Graham James case in 1997 seems to apply directly to this latest set of revelations:

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, fortune, and 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 and other authority figures.

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. They are 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.

This leaves the question of what is to be done to protect children from this and other forms of abuse. The best existing model for action at this point comes from Australia where in 2013 the Australian

Government created a six-member Royal Commission to study the problem and make recommendations. What has been done there is extensive, and it has been effective. The contents of the report are too detailed to go into here.

As a starting point anyone interested in seeking a solution to these sorts of problems should carefully exam the document "Child Protection in Sport" available at the "Clearinghouse for Sport" of the Australian Sports Commission.

The policies recommended are worth reading and are being implemented with positive results in Australia. The report is available at

: [https://www.clearinghouseforsport.gov.au/knowledge base/organised sport/sport integrity/child protection in sport](https://www.clearinghouseforsport.gov.au/knowledge%20base/organised%20sport/sport%20integrity/child%20protection%20in%20sport)

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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