

The Nasser Case

1-26-2018

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Recommended Citation

Crepeau, Richard C., "The Nasser Case" (2018). *On Sport and Society*. 822.
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety/822>

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE - THE NASSAR CASE
JANUARY 26, 2018

The reaction to the statements made by victims at Larry Nassar's trial has been dramatic as the horrifying details of decades of sexual abuse rolled out into the courtroom, then on television, and across social media. The women who appeared in court to confront Nassar have been praised for their courage and strength. The reality of the ordeal that they endured in silence was shocking and appalling.

As is always the case, when horrors like this are revealed, the question that is repeated over and over again is, "How could this have happened?" This is followed by many more questions about responsibility, knowledge, and blame. The focus is directed towards institutions and individuals and their failures.

Central to the opportunity for abuse are the elements of trust, authority, and power, both individual and institutional, within the culture of sport. In this case, the vulnerability of the athletes was driven by an ambition to excel, a strong competitive drive, and the fear of failure.

In the structure of modern sport, the athlete is subject to the judgement of others for advancement to elite status, as well as their own talents and skills. Modern sports structures are hierarchical, and within those structures, power is held by many and seldom by the athlete. Most often this power is held by men. In addition, the young and the female athletes are not taken seriously enough by those in power.

It is not enough for an athlete to develop their skills and talents. They must conform to the rules and regulations of the system and to the direction of coaches. Athletes also depend on trainers, dieticians, human kinetics experts, and doctors. That dependence can be exploited by any one of these. The advancement of the athlete can be aided or deterred by any of them, making the potential for exploitation quite high.

Sport structures whether they be local, regional, and national governing bodies; professional organizations; or immediate supervisors; all have a responsibility to prevent or contain any and all exploitation. However, they also are part of the structure or organization and seek to protect themselves and their institutions from scandal. The priorities given these

responsibilities, protection of athlete v. protection of organization, is a key factor in the administration of sport.

What happens within bureaucratic structures, and not just in sport, is that those on the governing side of the structures begin to see the growth and development of the structure as their primary responsibility. When that happens, the individuals dependent on the supervisory powers of these bodies can be victimized.

When the U.S. Gymnastics authorities were told of abuses, particularly of a sexual nature, a common reaction was to protect the structure. The credibility of the complaint was discounted, or the hope was that it was a onetime issue and would go away. When the accused is someone with a big reputation and has allies within the hierarchy, the inclination to cover up or contain is strong. When a revelation may hurt the governing body and its funding sources, a similar reaction is likely to take place.

Larry Nassar had a reputation as a top figure in sports medicine and his work in keeping athletes in top shape was considered first rate. This was a reputation developed and sustained not only within U.S. Gymnastics circles, but also at Michigan State University, and in the East Lansing sports community.

When an athlete with Olympic ambitions, regardless of age or stage of development, was sent to Larry Nassar, the athlete trusted those who made the referral, and the athlete was also aware of Nassar's sterling reputation. When things didn't seem right in the therapies that Nassar was using, who was the athlete to question this "expert" in the field?

Nassar worked with athletes at Michigan State, with athletes in U.S. Gymnastics, and with any number of Olympic athletes. Why would anyone question his methods, particularly a young athlete who wanted to live the Olympic Dream and knew that to make waves might jeopardize that dream? After all no one else seemed to be questioning Nassar's methods.

If, in fact, the athlete raised questions and saw that no action was taken, not even a minimal investigation, what should he or she do? They could choose to make waves and upset coaches and other authority figures, or keep quiet and let it go, rationalizing Nassar's treatment and living with the shame of what they had endured. For many of the athletes for over two

decades, the choice was silence. When the wall of silence finally came down, the noise of revelation became deafening.

So this tale of power now moves in another direction. The enablers within the gymnastics community, the governing bodies at Michigan State University, and within the USOC and the IOC now carry the responsibility of investigating this two-decade long atrocity. They must identify responsibility for what happened and find a way to restructure power within all those bureaucracies if they are to prevent something like this from happening again.

Finally, those in positions of power must serve the athletes, listen and investigate all those complaints and charges, and allow those investigations to go wherever the evidence takes them.

Power without responsibility is one meaning of corruption.

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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