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The NWSL Soccer Scandal

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE - THE NWSL SOCCER SCANDAL
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As bad as Jon (not John) Gruden's email revelations were, the news coming out of the National Women's Soccer League (NWSL) was worse. The principal player in this disaster is Paul Riley, who is now the poster boy for sexual harassment. His activity took place across two teams over six years while coaching NWSL teams in Portland and North Carolina. Riley had been one of the most respected and successful coaches in women's soccer, in both the NWSL and with the United States National and Olympic teams. Over the past six years, he built this reputation and public image, although it did not reflect reality.

While coaching the Portland entry in the NWSL in 2015, Riley was accused by two players, Mana Shim and Sinead Farrelly, of sexual abuse and of coercing Farrelly to have sex with him. The Portland team and the league quietly conducted an investigation. League Commissioner, Lisa Baird, said the investigation had come to a conclusion, but she would not share any of the details with the two players. Nothing was made public; although, Riley was dismissed as head coach after the season. Several months later, Riley moved on to North Carolina as head coach, despite having lost his position in Portland.

Last week Riley, was fired at North Carolina, as he was accused of similar behavior for which he had been fired in Portland. This was the result of continuing calls by Sinead Farrelly and Mana Shim for justice and with strong support from Alex Morgan and the players association.

Riley's pattern of behavior was not an outlier in the NWSL. **The Athletic** reported last week: "Four different coaches, all men, have been fired in just the past four months for off-field reasons, including alleged sexual misconduct, verbal abuse, toxic work environments and racist remarks. Even worse, in almost every case, the coach's problematic behavior had been known before his hiring -- there were patterns, not one-offs -- but those teams hired them anyway."

What is clear in all of this is the unwillingness of NWSL officials to take player complaints seriously. When and if any investigation was done, there seemed to be a tendency to ignore the charges or simply bury them within the team and/or league

administration. The image of the league was judged to be more important than any abuse being faced by the players.

League Commissioner Lisa Baird resigned her position, as did others in league and team offices. In a broadcast of an NWSL game last week, former NWSL player Kaylyn Kyle offered her reaction: "Devastated, disgusted, but I'm not shocked, and that's the problem. I mean, I played in this league where this was normalized. That's not OK."

So, yet another sexual harassment scandal is exposed.

It seems there has been a continuing cascade of reports of sexual abuse across multiple sports and in multiple nations. In discussing the Congressional hearings on the Nassar Case a few weeks ago, I noted that there seemed to be something seriously wrong at the heart of Sportsworld. When those in charge protect the abusers, enable the abusers, or are the abusers, it is no longer possible to ignore the depth of these problems.

So, what might have led to these problems? One clear issue is the power that coaches exercise over athletes, and this issue is magnified when it is male coaches that have power over female athletes. In any discussion of harassment, this must be acknowledged. Coaches and administrators can impact and control the ambitions and lives of those over whom they have power, and many are willing to use that power.

The other subject that needs to be part of the discussion is the fact that sexual relationships, particularly abusive ones, are fundamentally power relationships. This is one of the reasons that there is great concern when a relationship develops up or down a hierarchy. The norms of society and, to some degree, the law assumes that reality. Unfortunately, those who enforce the laws and govern the relationships are not always attentive to that reality.

In the university setting in which I have worked for decades, there is a taboo, if not a regulation, against professors dating students. The reason is simple. At the heart of the professor/student relationship is the reality of power, even when it seems to play no role at all.

Within the athletic structures, the power relationship is much stronger than the professor/student relationship, and the potential for abuse much higher. Also, within the athletic world, there is a long history of the denigration of women, and that denigration has a strong sexual element to it.

The assumptions of female weakness, both physical and/or emotional, have long been a given in the sports culture. The assumption that athletic skills in women have a negative effect on their femininity is an old and persistent notion, even if it has faded in the last few decades. This is one of the things illustrated in the email revelations of last week, even though some men wish to dismiss the importance of their vocabulary by calling it "locker room talk."

If you want to dive deeper into this subject, consulting studies on masculinity may offer some insight. If you exam the Victorian culture that set new norms surrounding the nature of males and females in the 19th century, light can be shed on the depth of the issue.

This is not simply an American problem. Women are denigrated in many cultures across the globe, and sexual harassment is practiced with little fear of consequences. Does the near universality of these views indicate something much deeper at work within the male psyche? Some believe it does. Is this all about power and the fear of losing it, not to mention the self-satisfaction of wielding it?

Reading the writings by men on the nature of women from the late 19th and early 20th century is a disturbing exercise. Reading those written by physicians and those who practiced mind science is even more disturbing. Much of it has strong undertones of disdain towards women that reveals a latent hatred in some.

At some point, there has to be an honest, frank, and forthright discussion of these issues within the athletic industrial complex. If and when that will happen does not seem to be on the horizon. It needs to be.

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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